

COM/365

DEAN'S REPORT 2022

How COM students
—with the help of
alumni—are getting
the most from their
internships

Deborah Douglas
explains how
The Emancipator
will reframe
discussions about
social justice
and race

Guo, Lei mines
social media data to
understand how news
spreads and morphs

THE SPORTS GUY

AFTER SUCCESS AT
ESPN, IN PODCASTS
AND WITH HIS OWN
MEDIA COMPANY,
BILL SIMMONS WANTS
TO CHANGE THE FACE
OF JOURNALISM

COM by the NUMBERS

DONORS

1,257

Total Donors

\$1,347,021

Total Donations

14

Endowed
Graduate
Scholarships

24

Endowed
Undergraduate
Scholarships

5

Endowed
Professorships

FACULTY

219

Total Faculty

83

Full-Time Faculty

136

Part-Time Faculty

20

Professors

29

Associate
Professors

17

Assistant
Professors

17

Full-Time Lecturers
and Instructors

STUDENTS

2,004

Total Undergraduate Students

558

Total Graduate Students

Emerging Media Studies: 73

- Graduate Students: 59

- PhD Students: 14

Journalism: 81

Film and Television: 104

- Film and Television Studies: 11

- Media Ventures: 15

- Screenwriting: 26

- Television: 52

Mass Communication, Advertising
and Public Relations: 300

- Advertising: 105

- Public Relations: 100

- Media Science and Marketing

- Communication Research: 95



FORWARD MARCH

As I write, students are just starting spring 2022 classes. And, as usual, we have so much to share about the past year's achievements, thanks to the great work of our faculty, staff, students—and our wonderful alumni. Let me give you the whistle-stop tour of what you'll find in this edition of *COM/365*, the dean's report.

In year two of the pandemic, COM continued to adapt to help students thrive. In this, we are grateful for the generous alumni who have created new scholarships, such as podcaster and sportswriter Bill Simmons ('93), whose gift will help aspiring journalists; see "Hitting to All Fields," on page 12. Through their connections and gifts, alumni also make possible internships, which augment learning in the classroom and help students land that crucial first job. In "The Intern Factor," starting on page 20, students share what those experiences have meant to them.

One thing is clear: COM skills will help you no matter which direction your career takes. Consider Colleen McCreary ('95), who majored in PR and is chief people officer at Credit Karma. In response to the pandemic, McCreary leaned into her communication knowledge to boost transparency, morale and even civic engagement at her company. Turn to "The People Person" on page 30 to learn how.

In addition to making things more difficult for students, the pandemic threw into sharp relief the world's ongoing problems with social justice issues, misinformation and science communication. What is COM doing about those? Glad you asked.

Using data science, the Justice Media co-Lab—a partnership of COM student and faculty journalists and the Faculty of Computing & Data Sciences—shines a light on the injustices suffered by disadvantaged communities. Working with media partners, the co-Lab course now has several published stories to its credit. We also eagerly anticipate the upcoming launch of *The Emancipator*, a multimedia collaboration of BU's Center for Antiracist Research and the *Boston Globe*. Turn to page 16 to read about Deborah Douglas, coeditor-in-chief, in "An Established Presence."

Early in 2020, COVID misinformation became so prevalent that the World Health Organization dubbed the situation an "infodemic." Thanks to COM researchers, we're gaining insights about how to combat such fake news. In "Calculating Media Influence," starting on page 26, for example, you'll learn about Guo, Lei, who uses data science to study issues around journalism and democracy. In a recent paper, Guo and her team analyzed differences in pandemic coverage and the power of misinformation in various countries.

THE PANDEMIC THREW INTO SHARP RELIEF THE WORLD'S ONGOING PROBLEMS WITH SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES, MISINFORMATION AND SCIENCE COMMUNICATION.

As director of COM's Communication Research Center (learn more on page 5), Michelle Amazeen also aims to share research discoveries about the mechanisms behind misinformation with the practitioners and policy leaders who need to know; a recent Civic Science Fellow grant from the Rita Allen Foundation will help Amazeen and colleagues extend their efforts in the coming year.

Of course, even when science communication does not involve a fast-changing public health emergency, it can be fraught. Many agree that more researchers should engage the public about their work. On page 4, meet a solution: a free global support network for researchers that's just arrived at COM, called SciCommers. SciCommers includes chats with expert mentors in communication, a writing program and discussions on key themes via Slack channels.

Looking ahead to the rest of 2022, I can't wait to see what the students, faculty and staff at COM will come up with next.

Best,



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Dean

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Mariette DiChristina ('86)

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HITTING TO ALL FIELDS

Bill Simmons has done it all: ESPN columnist, best-selling author, Emmy-winning producer and podcast star. Now he's running the sports and pop culture start-up *The Ringer*—and trying to change the face of journalism.

AN ESTABLISHED PRESENCE

A career in journalism has prepared Deborah D. Douglas to break from traditional media with *The Emancipator*, a collaboration between the *Boston Globe* and BU's Center for Antiracist Research, which aims to reframe the issue of racial justice.



THE INTERN FACTOR

Internships can launch careers. Five students and alumni describe their experiences and the donor support that made them possible.



CALCULATING MEDIA INFLUENCE

Guo, Lei, an associate professor of emerging media studies, uses data science to study the interplay between journalism, social media and democracy.

COM THIS YEAR

4 A new effort to help scientists communicate, a book about a failed terrorist attack in the Midwest and a prestigious screen-writing award highlighted a year of accomplishments at COM.



TERRIER HEADLINES

34 COM alumni made news everywhere from late-night television to the Indianapolis 500. Learn about some of last year's top alumni achievements.



THE PEOPLE PERSON

30 Human resources and public relations executive Colleen McCreary ('95) used her COM training to help Credit Karma navigate the pandemic.



THANKS TO ALL OF YOU

38 Four students offer messages of thanks to the many members of the COM community who have provided support over the past year.





FROM NPR TO COM

SciCommers, a global program that helps scientists and engineers improve their communication skills, moves to BU

BY MARA SASSOON

When Joe Palca was a psychology PhD student at the University of California at Santa Cruz, he had an epiphany: he didn't want to go into research or academia. Instead, he decided to pursue science journalism. But as he advanced in his career—starting off in broadcast, then moving to print, before joining NPR in 1992 as a science correspondent—he noticed the struggle many have in translating complex science into clear, engaging and not overly sensational writing. “Coming out of a science PhD program, that was the biggest job for me, just remembering other people don't know all the stuff that I had been using routinely for six or seven years,” he says.

For the past five years, Palca has been working to help scientists and engineers develop their communication skills through his program SciCommers, which recently found a new home at COM.

A BIG IDEA

In 2012, Palca launched the NPR series *Joe's Big Idea*. “My goal was to try to talk more about the science process than results. I also wanted to show that scientists are real people,” he says. “I want to change the way scientists are portrayed frequently as men in white coats, looking at slides.” And he wanted to help students and scientists who, like him, don't want to go into research or academia. So, in 2017, along with NPR producer Maddie Sofia, he established NPR SciCommers (originally called Friends of *Joe's Big Idea*).

The free program helps members practice pitching their article ideas; they then receive feedback from an experienced editor. More than 100 stories written by members have made it into top publications including *Scientific American*, *Smithsonian* and *Popular Science*. Palca and Sofia also created a mentor chat series, covering topics like freelancing and science podcasting, and built a peer-support network on the messaging app Slack,

where members—of which there are more than 2,000—chat about #freelancing, #stem_inclusion and #jobs_fellowships.

A NEW CHAPTER AT COM

About two years ago, Palca began planning for SciCommers' initial grant to run out. “We really wanted to find an educational space that could grow the program, someplace that was interested in promoting science communication as a mainstream activity.” COM, he says, is a perfect fit. As of November 2021, the college has assumed management of SciCommers.

COM plans to build on the existing program of mentor chats, peer support and writing program, where professional editors support members in pitching and writing for popular outlets. In addition, members don't need to have a BU connection. “The program is open to anyone. Our hope is for this group to be as diverse as possible.”

Mariette DiChristina ('86), COM's dean and the former editor-in-chief of *Scientific American*, says she's excited about the program's arrival. “It will help advance both BU's and COM's strategies around fostering research that matters as well as COM's mission of improving understanding to address societal challenges, which are multidisciplinary and complex.” /

A COUNTER TO MISINFORMATION

Michelle Amazeen looks to build on Communication Research Center's impact

BY BURT GLASS



Depending on which source someone trusts, they could end up falsely believing that vaccines are more likely to harm them than save their life or that climate change is nothing to worry about. With misinformation seeping across the internet, getting fact to triumph over fiction these days is a demanding job—one that Michelle Amazeen hopes COM's Communication Research Center (CRC) can help with.



Michelle Amazeen hopes the Communication Research Center will develop areas of focus, including the study of misinformation in the media.

Amazeen, an associate professor of mass communication, advertising and public relations, was named director of the CRC in July. An expert on political communication, media effects and persuasion, Amazeen was a contributor to *The Debunking Handbook 2020* and *The COVID-19 Vaccine Communication Handbook*, both guides to fighting the spread of misinformation. Founded in 1959, the CRC has functioned as COM's research hub for faculty and students ever since. She spoke with *COM/365* about her new role.

COM/365: What is the role of research at COM?

Michelle Amazeen: Our researchers are developing communication theories—an understanding of how a process works. They're

also developing methods of studying communication. Both of those can inform what practitioners do. Early public relations, for example, was not theoretically informed. It was very practice-driven. It was just professionals communicating with the different publics without any understanding of what works and why, and with whom it works. The profession has evolved because of research.

How does the CRC fit into that?

The CRC is all about building understanding through discovery, so research helps us discover how things work, especially as new media emerge. A few years ago, nobody had ever heard of deep-fake videos. And science denialism—that's increasingly become a huge issue. Through discovery, CRC fellows can help people understand these evolutions in media and communication. The CRC's research has never been more important than right now.

Do you plan to take CRC in a new direction?

In the past, the CRC has essentially been there to support our research fellows and graduate student fellows. That's all going to continue, but there's going to be a pivot toward making the work of our fellows more accessible to policymakers, journalists and to consumers and citizens. And we will see if there are any natural areas of focus within the research that our fellows are doing. Several are working on misinformation in the media and civic engagement, for instance, so this could become a more focused area of research. /

AN ARTICLE OF FAITH

Sofie Isenberg used a Pulitzer Fellowship to explore the ties between religion and well-being in the face of the pandemic



Sofie Isenberg

When Sofie Isenberg applied for a prestigious Pulitzer Center Reporting Fellowship in April 2020, she had big plans. The pandemic was still in its earliest days, and she pitched the idea of driving across the country to report on the mental health impacts of COVID-19. By the time she was named one of 40 fellows two weeks later, the United States was largely locked down.

"I very quickly decided that was not something I felt ethically able to do," says Isenberg ('22) of her original on-the-ground angle.

Stuck at home with a reporting fellowship, but nothing to report on, she—like so many other people—fell into "a big

empty hole," experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety as life tumbled out of her control. At one point, Isenberg started wondering how others were coping, particularly people of faith.

The seed of a new story took root. Isenberg's curiosity prompted her to reach out to faith organizations and researchers. When a Muslim advocacy group pointed her toward a global study showing Muslims were holding up better than most others, those roots grew a stem. Over the next few months, she spoke with people of different faiths (or none)—Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Wiccans—as well as scholars, sociologists, mental health experts and neuroscientists. "It just blew up into this giant project," says Isenberg.

The Sunday Long Read, a long-form journalism platform founded by Don Van Natta Jr. ('86), planned to publish Isenberg's story in early 2022.

Although the Pulitzer Fellowship would typically bring funding for international travel, seminars in Washington, D.C., and training opportunities, Isenberg says the Zoom-era replacements—online conferences to share projects, expert lectures filled with industry advice—were still insightful. And the story itself has had a big personal impact, helping drag her out of that empty hole.

"I went on a journey of discovery and found all this really interesting research and spoke to all these wonderful people," she says. —Andrew Thurston

NEW FACULTY AT COM

EMERGING MEDIA STUDIES

Chris Chao Su, assistant professor

FILM AND TELEVISION

Amy Geller, lecturer

Bruno Guaraná, master lecturer

Hayes Jackson, assistant professor

Adam Lapidus, assistant professor

Tim Palmer, professor of the practice

Gustavo Rosa, assistant professor

JOURNALISM

Shira Springer, lecturer

MASS COMMUNICATION, ADVERTISING AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Lisa Borden, associate professor of the practice

Sarah Dasher, lecturer

Janna Greenberg, professor of the practice

Todd Van Hoosear, lecturer

Shawn Zupp, professor of the practice

Quotable Moment

"WHEN WE REMEMBER THE LAST FOUR YEARS, THE HARD PARTS, THE ROADBLOCKS, THE OBSTACLES THAT ALMOST STOPPED OUR JOURNEY SHORT WILL BE SO EASY TO REMEMBER, BUT I CHALLENGE US TO REMEMBER THE GOOD, THE JOYOUS, THE PARTS THAT—LIKE BREATHING AND DREAMING AND SMILING AND WAVING—ARE SO AUTOMATIC AND CRITICAL TO WHO WE ARE."

—**ARCHELLE THELEMAQUE ('21)**,
2021 BU Commencement student speaker





ILLUMINATING MENTAL ILLNESS

Grad student wins prestigious screenwriting fellowship

By AMY LASKOWSKI

A man obsessed with symmetry, a woman who dreams of removing one of her legs. He wants to support her, but he worries that she will soon become asymmetrical. “*Odds* is such a bizarre story, I wasn’t sure how it would land,” says Paul Coleman of his feature-length script that won the prestigious Carol Mendelsohn College Drama Fellowship, awarded by Humanitas, in 2021. “I’m kind of stunned by the whole thing.”

The Humanitas Prizes are awarded annually and honor film and television writing that illuminates the human experience. Daniel Plagens, a program manager at Humanitas, says every element of *Odds* stood out to the judges, citing its subject matter and Coleman’s confident and empathetic voice. “Paul’s creative choices organically lead to a bold conclusion that is sure to stir deep conversations,” Plagens says. “His work offers unique insights into the human condition and evokes strong, visceral reactions that signal to readers they are in the hands of a talented writer with a very bright future ahead of him.”

The film is a “rom-com at its heart, but a very strange one,” Coleman (’22) says. “It’s about a guy with severe obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), who falls for a woman with a rare

form of body dysmorphia, called body integrity identity disorder, where people want to remove an otherwise healthy limb and then go on to live normal, healthy lives. So it’s built on the bones of a rom-com, but instead of a snowstorm that cancels the guy’s flight, it’s the couple’s own mental illnesses that are the obstacle between them and happiness.”

Coleman says the story was influenced by another romantic comedy, the 1960 Oscar-winning *The Apartment*, directed by Billy Wilder, about a man who lets his boss have extramarital affairs in his apartment in hopes of a promotion. Coleman, who has OCD himself, wanted to write a character with body integrity identity disorder, which he always found interesting, although the screenwriter is careful to say that both conditions take on a heightened reality in his script.

And how does Coleman plan to use the \$20,000 prize money? “I’m broke, so I could do something responsible with it, but I think I’m going to make a short film with one of my previous scripts.” He also hopes to keep working on *Odds*, in case a producer asks to take a look. “It could be made without a lot of money,” he says. “If in a few years there isn’t much action, I’ll try to cobble it together myself.” /

ANNUAL ACCOLADES

In a year marked by the pandemic, COM students and faculty continued to tell award-winning stories



BUTV10's 2020 election coverage won Telly and regional Emmy awards.

ADVERTISING

COM students received 49 Hatch Awards, which honor the New England creative marketing and branding community. **Kylee Hegarty ('20)** received the All Show Next Generation Award, and Hegarty, **Xiuqi Cai ('20)**, **Shan He ('20)**, **Shubhangi Verma ('21)**, **Seiji Wakabayashi ('21)** and **Ruby Yang ('21)** received gold awards.

EMERGING MEDIA

James Katz, the Feld Professor of Emerging Media, received the Frederick Williams Prize from the International Communication Association for his contributions to the study of communication and technology.



for his contributions to the study of communication and technology.

FILM & TELEVISION

BUTV10 received four student awards from the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences Boston/New England Chapter, including best newscast, public affairs/community service, live sports event and sports program. The station

also received a bronze Telly Award for its coverage of the 2020 election.

The surfing documentary *Waiting for Waves* won big at COM's 41st Redstone Film Festival, winning first place: **Jacob Zaoutis ('21)**, director and producer, **Zoe DeWitt ('22)**, producer; best cinematographer **Felix Phillips ('21)** and audience favorite awards. Other awards included best screenplay, **Meredith Brown ('20)**, *FUN-eral*; best editing, tie: **Jonny Arruda ('20)**, *FUN-eral* and *Zaoutis, From Sophia with Love*; best sound de-

sign: **O'Neil Henry ('21)**, *The Way You Smile*; alumni short film: **Wendy Cong Zhao (CFA'11, COM'11)**, *My First Session*; Fleder-Rosenberg Short Screenplay Contest: **Nicole Shuhan Shen ('23)**, *Mei-Ying*; Film and Television Studies Award for Innovative Scholarship: **Dana Alston ('21)**, **Chi-Tsung Chang ('21)** and **Peter Johnson (Questrom'15, COM'15,'21)**.

JOURNALISM

BU student photographers collected 18 awards in the Boston Press Photographers Association's annual college contest. **Laurnyn Allen ('21)** received 12 awards, including firsts in the news, feature and story categories. **Robert Branning ('21)**, **Caitlin Faulds ('21)**, **Grace Ferguson ('22)**, **Mohan Ge ('22)**, **Anran Xie ('21)** and **Campbell Zachara ('21)** also received awards.

Jenifer McKim, a clinical instructor of investigative journalism, won a regional Edward R. Murrow award for her story about Massachusetts prisoners with mental illnesses and the state's parole system; her students assisted with the reporting.

Students from BU and five other universities, collaborating through the Howard Center for Investigative Journalism, received the Society of Professional Journalists Sigma Delta Chi Collabora-



Waiting for Waves won the Redstone Film Festival's overall award as well as honors for cinematography and audience favorite.

Quotable Moment

"I HAVE BEEN A PART OF STUDENT GOVERNMENT SINCE I WAS IN SEVENTH GRADE ... I'VE SEEN HOW IT CAN FORCE PEOPLE TO GROW AS A LEADER, AS A PUBLIC SPEAKER, AND IT ALSO FORCES YOU TO SPEAK UP FOR YOURSELF AND FOR OTHER PEOPLE. ... AND I THINK IT'S ALSO REALLY IMPORTANT FOR ME, AS A BLACK WOMAN, TO BE THERE FOR REPRESENTATION."

—**NYAH JORDAN (CGS'20, COM'22),**
BU student body president



tive Journalism Award for "Nowhere to Go," a series about the impacts of homelessness in the United States.

Local, USA, a WORLD Channel program hosted by **Tina McDuffie**, an associate professor of the practice in journalism, received a silver Telly Award in the general-television category for the episode "Pandemic in Seattle."

Isabella Reish ('24) won best short script, for her film *Unfinished Business*, at the NYC International Screenplay Awards.



PUBLIC RELATIONS

"F*ck It Won't Cut It," a student-created COVID-19 safety campaign, placed second in the *PRWeek* Awards Community Relations category. It was the only student campaign among 135 nominees.

COM-WIDE

Nineteen graduating seniors received COM's highest undergraduate honor, the Blue Chip Award, which recognizes outstanding leadership in school and the community: **Nicole Adamski Barradas ('21)**, **Tal Bodner (CGS'19, COM'21)**, **Will Burnett (CGS'19, COM'21)**, **Isabel Contreras (CAS'21, COM'21)**, **Bruce Rahsaan Dennis (CGS'19, COM'21)**, **Remy Frohman ('21)**, **Katie Gallagher ('21)**, **Solange Hackshaw (CAS'21, COM'21)**, **Sage Holloway (CAS'21, COM'21)**, **Danielle Iuliani ('21;'23)**, **Kate Kzhemanovska ('21)**, **Maggie Leone ('21)**, **Haley Lerner ('21)**, **Alexis Gray Mills (CGS'19, COM'21)**, **Malaika Moyer ('21)**, **Shaun Robinson ('21)**, **Lindsey Rosenblatt ('21)**, **Hannah Schweitzer ('21)** and **Meredith Varner ('21;'23)**.



Tori Murry (from left), Olayinka Sarayi, Aisha Sheikh and Archelle Thelemaque

COM's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Committee selected four students to receive the inaugural Leadership Excellence in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Awards: **Tori Murry ('21)**, **Olayinka Sarayi ('21)**, **Aisha Sheikh (CGS'19, COM'21)** and **Archelle Thelemaque ('21)**.

Gary Sheffer, the Sandra R. Frazier Professor of Public Relations, received COM's Becker Family Teacher of the Year Award. **Doug Gould**, a professor of the practice in advertising, received the college's Lyndon Baines Johnson Student Advising Award.



Quotable Moment

"WE'RE INUNDATED RIGHT NOW WITH TWEETS AND HOT TAKES AND BREAKING NEWS ALERTS THAT DOMINATE OUR THOUGHTS FOR A MOMENT AND THE NEWS CYCLE FOR A DAY OR TWO.... BITS OF NEWS OR INFORMATION RARELY CHANGE OUR PERSPECTIVE OF THE WORLD OR OUR PLACE IN IT. NARRATIVE NONFICTION RARELY FAILS TO DO SO."

—MITCHELL ZUCKOFF, Sumner M. Redstone Professor in Narrative Studies and director of the Power of Narrative Conference, during opening remarks at the 2021 conference

STUDENT RESEARCH. SAFER SCHOOLS

COM's Communication Research Methods aids nonprofit created in wake of Sandy Hook shooting

By ANDREW THURSTON

As schools tried to get back into their groove with in-person learning last fall, they were balancing COVID prevention with all the usual back-to-school health and safety issues. Threats from bullying, discrimination, substance use and mass shootings haven't gone away, even if they're not dominating the conversation like masks and vaccines.

One resource many educators turn to for support in navigating common problems—old and new—is Safe and Sound Schools' annual *State of School Safety Report*, a guide to issues as diverse as discrimination and digital security, coronavirus and active shooter drills.

It's one of the nonprofit's signature efforts, full of recommendations and advice—all underpinned by stats from a survey of student, staff and parent attitudes on key safety topics. But pulling together the data at the heart of the report is a lot of work, which is why Safe and Sound Schools partners with COM to produce it.

For the past three years, the survey results have been compiled, interpreted

and presented by students in Anne P. Danehy's Communication Research Methods class, a required course for public relations and advertising undergraduates.

Danehy admits that students aren't always fired up about compulsory classes—especially the ones that talk about seemingly dry topics like survey measures and scales—which is why she divides them into small groups to tackle real research projects. Many of the assignments are client-led, like the one with Safe and Sound Schools.

"What I hear from my students is that they want to do work that matters," says Danehy, a master lecturer and associate dean of academic affairs. "This is a project that matters to them."

Founded by two parents whose children died in the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, Safe and Sound Schools' mission is to protect schools and students by providing crisis prevention, response and recovery support.

The students also work closely with Amy Shanler, an associate professor of

the practice in public relations and long-time advisor to Safe and Sound Schools. She developed its first safety report and turned to Danehy and her students for help producing subsequent editions.

According to Shanler, the students' passion enthuses the Safe and Sound Schools team, calling it "a charging opportunity" for the nonprofit. She says there are other benefits to working with COM, too: The students are only a few years out of high school themselves and each cohort brings new and diverse experiences to the work. They also have fresh promotion and outreach ideas based on how they consume media. Shanler says the report used to be a lengthy text document—until students suggested a brighter, presentation-style format packed with images and callouts, as well as the usual stats and facts.

"Schools can see this isn't a fluffy program—this is real grounded research," says Shanler. "And it just really helps with overall awareness and reputation having the name of Boston University behind you with that research." /

UNDERCOVER WITH HOMEGROWN TERRORISTS

Professor's new book tells the story of an unlikely hero
By JOEL BROWN

One afternoon in 2019, a neighbor knocked on Dick Lehr's door in suburban Boston. The neighbor knew that Lehr was a former *Boston Globe* reporter who had worked on the paper's investigative Spotlight team and had published several true-crime books. He had some guests he thought Lehr should meet. They have a hell of a story, he said.

"I'm just glad I was home!" says Lehr, a professor of journalism.

The guests, who had just attended a panel on reconciliation and were on their way home to tiny Garden City, Kansas, were Mursal Nayelee, a leader in the Somali immigrant community; a hospital executive named Benjamin Anderson, who was trying to make the Somalis feel welcome in Garden City (and was an old friend of Lehr's neighbor); and a blue-collar guy named Dan Day who had worked undercover for the FBI to stop homegrown terrorists who planned to blow up an apartment complex where many of those Somalis lived.

Lehr was captivated by their story, which he retells in *White Hot Hate: A True Story of Domestic Terrorism in America's Heartland* (Mariner Books, 2021). "Right away the story wheels started turning," says Lehr, whose previous books include *Black Mass: Whitey Bulger, the FBI, and a Devil's Deal*.

So he started researching.

The 2016 mass shooting at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando by a Muslim pledging fealty to ISIS had enraged members of a Kansas militia splinter group who called themselves Crusaders. Their hatred for Muslims had already been building as the Somali community had grown in Garden City; now the militia decided to detonate bombs to slaughter people they believed were working for a jihadi takeover of the United States.

The Crusaders had been trying to recruit Day, a conservative and a gun owner, who was not fond of Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton or big government. But the more angry his new friends became, the less comfortable Day grew. He remembered the horror that another homegrown terrorist's bomb had inflicted on Oklahoma City, in 1995. And he agreed to become an undercover informant for the FBI, infiltrating their wannabe terror cell and ultimately heading off their plot.

"This is the kind of story I love to do," Lehr says. "At the heart of it, you have this true-crime quality, with a lot of action and




drama, which is always hard to resist. I love the timeliness of it, with the rise of militias and white nationalism and Islamophobia. All that stuff just made it feel urgent."

Dan Day's ordinariness was part of what made the story extraordinary. He was diffident, private, devoted to his family, struggling with health and financial challenges. His politics and his economic struggles made him appear a likely recruit to the militia group, but he was also very much his own man, serious about right and wrong.

For eight months, he did his best to convince the hate-mongers he was one of them. He wore a wire to meeting after meeting, sometimes with little or no backup nearby. Those recordings plus trial transcripts helped Lehr piece the story together while Day's heroics, and the way the community came together afterward, provided an optimistic ending.

"For once, I was able to write something deeply dramatic and intense and timely—'This is America now'—but I like the fact that in the end, the bombs did not go off," Lehr says. "Garden City was tested, it bent but didn't break, and there's this sense of, maybe, hope at the end." /





ALUM **BILL SIMMONS** HAS DONE IT ALL: ESPN COLUMNIST, BEST-SELLING AUTHOR, PODCAST STAR, FILM PRODUCER. NOW HE'S CEO OF HIS OWN MEDIA COMPANY—AND HE'S HOPING TO CHANGE THE FACE OF JOURNALISM.

HITTING TO ALL FIELDS

By MARC CHALUFOUR

Photos by
PATRICK STRATTNER

BILL SIMMONS WANTED TO STAR ON THE LOCAL TEAM.

He never expected to throw touchdowns in Foxboro or drain three-pointers at the Boston Garden—his dream was to write a sports column for the *Boston Globe*. But a recent college grad has as much chance of stepping into that role as they do hitting leadoff for the Red Sox.

Fortunately for Simmons ('93), it was the 1990s and there was a new, burgeoning opportunity: the internet. For \$50 a week, Simmons began writing as “The Boston Sports Guy” on AOL Digital City. Access was limited to America Online subscribers, but he began to build a reputation with his passion, humor and scathing criticism—characteristics often absent in mainstream media.

By now, Simmons' rise from Boston Sports Guy to media mogul is the stuff of legend. While a generation of content producers tried to figure out how to monetize the internet, Simmons rode the popularity of his everyfan's voice to one of the most desired jobs in the business: columnist for ESPN. He pivoted to video at the right moment then dove into podcasts just before they became cool. Seven years after an acrimonious departure from ESPN, Simmons is the CEO of *The Ringer*, a sports and culture company that he founded in 2016 and recently sold to Spotify, reportedly for almost \$200 million.

Simmons appreciates the privilege of his position and now that he's his own boss—able to give young writers the sort of break that ESPN gave him—he's taking on a new challenge. With a series of gifts to universities, including the Simmons Family Scholarship at COM, he's begun funding graduate scholarships in hopes of building diversity in journalism and sports media.

VOICE OF THE FAN

Simmons rose so quickly, while writing so prolifically in his casual tone, that he made it look easy. Behind the scenes, though, he had his doubts. After earning his master's at COM, he'd covered high school sports for the *Boston Herald*. "I was looking at the landscape the whole time thinking, 'How do I get ahead?'" says Simmons, who split time between Brookline, Massachusetts, and Connecticut as a kid and graduated from the College of the Holy Cross. He left the *Herald* in 1996, after three years, to bartend. "At that point, it seemed like the dream was dead."

Like any rabid Boston sports fan, he read the sports pages and listened to sports radio, and kept thinking there had to be space for a 20-something voice. "Everybody who was writing about or talking about Boston sports was so old," he says. "I put real thought into what I would want to read, what I would be jealous of if somebody else did it." AOL gave him space to experiment. He didn't write with the voice of a reporter inside the locker room—"I couldn't get press passes for anything," he says—but of the fan ranting from a living room couch or the next bar stool over. "I was young and angry. And I was able to push the envelope in a lot of different ways."

He debated sports movies. He rooted for, and vented about, the local teams. He roasted ESPN's annual awards gala, the ESPYS, with a running diary of the broadcast: "8:03 — The show kicks off ... 8:04 — Just slammed my head against the coffee table for 30 seconds." Readers identified: "The Boston Sports Guy" eventually averaged 10,000 daily visitors.

"By 1999 I felt like this was something that wasn't just an outlet for me," he says. "I went all-in on writing." Then came his big break: freelance assignments for ESPN. In 2001, he wrote an over-the-top piece about former Red Sox star-turned-nemesis Roger Clemens, "Is Clemens the Antichrist?" Simmons tore into one of the greatest pitchers in baseball history. "Fans. He doesn't have any. ... He's like Wolf in *Pulp Fiction*—no attachment to anyone or anything, a hired gun, a means to an end." By the end of the column, Clemens was "Darth Vader with a Texas accent." ESPN hired Simmons later that year.

After a brief hiatus to write for *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, Simmons returned to ESPN in 2004, just in time for the historic Red Sox World Series victory that elevated his Boston-centric columns to a national audience.

Then he *really* got to work. Simmons followed that 2004 season with his first book, *Now I Can Die in Peace* (ESPN, 2005), about the Red Sox, then another, *The Book of Basketball* (ESPN, 2009), about the National Basketball Association. Both were best sellers. He tried producing; in 2007 he cocreated ESPN's Emmy-nominated *30 for 30* documentary

"YOU CAN SAY [DIVERSITY] IS ONE OF THE MANY THINGS YOU CARE ABOUT, BUT SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO MAKE IT THE MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU CARE ABOUT."



series. He also began recording *The B.S. Report* in 2007; by 2009 it was ESPN's most popular podcast, with more than one million downloads a month.

Simmons admits to a fear of stagnation. "I made the decision that I didn't want to look back and think I'd had the exact same year as the year before," he says. "My goal is to always keep moving, keep trying stuff." Whether it was because of his appeal to sports fans or his uncanny ability to navigate the shifting digital media landscape, his stuff kept succeeding.

"Simmons is the most prominent sportswriter in America," the *New York Times Magazine* declared in 2011—and he had done it his way. "Simmons makes no pretense of neutrality," Jonathan Mahler wrote. "He is *the* fan, the voice of the citizenry of sports nation."

GOING BIG

Shortly after the *Times* profile, Simmons launched *Grantland*, an ESPN-backed site focused on long-form journalism. For four years, they published a blend of stories that were uniquely Simmons, which is to say sports alongside—and sometimes mixed with—culture. Author Colson Whitehead covered the Summer Olympics. Critic Wesley Morris reviewed movies. Novelist Dave Eggers reflected on baseball and sports biographer Jane Leavy covered the Super Bowl.

That ended in 2015. Simmons was suspended by ESPN after a podcast where he called the commissioner of the NFL, Roger Goodell, a liar. Then the network declined to renew his contract. Some might have sulked after losing such a lucrative, high-profile gig. Simmons pounced.



Within a few months, he had struck a deal with HBO to host a weekly talk show, *Any Given Wednesday with Bill Simmons*, and develop future projects, while HBO would invest in his new media company: *The Ringer*. While the show only aired for one season, Simmons' relationship with HBO continued. *Andre the Giant*, which he produced, became HBO Sports' most watched sports documentary ever.

Meanwhile, joined by his top editors from *Grantland*, Simmons began planning his next act.

THE AUDIO ERA

The Ringer plays to its strengths. It doesn't exhaustively cover every inch of the sports world, like ESPN, and it's not publishing box scores, like the local paper. But the staff goes deep on the major sports and covers pop culture the same way. "We realized we should double down on all this stuff, like Marvel and Star Wars," Simmons says. "Let's cover it like we cover the NBA." If your weekend starts with a *Succession* binge and ends with *Sunday Night Football*, *The Ringer* is there for you, with previews, recaps, long-form stories and podcasts.

Amid all of that, one byline is notably absent: Simmons hasn't published a column in four years. Writing on the internet has changed: Readers don't want thousands of words and writers are more reluctant to experiment, he says. "I hate to be the old guy complaining about Twitter, but I think it's made people really self-conscious. People are afraid to take chances because they don't want the backlash." Reflecting on "Is Clements the Antichrist?," he says, "Nobody would write that now, and maybe that's a good thing."

So Simmons has redirected his creative energy. "Podcasts are more fun to do than writing at this point," he says. "They are so intimate. You want to feel like you're hanging out with your friends." Sound familiar? It's the same formula that attracted readers to his early columns.

And Simmons is making the most of this moment. Since the Spotify sale, *The Ringer* has reportedly doubled its podcast output and increased the staff by 25 percent. In December, Simmons alone published 14 episodes of *The Bill Simmons Podcast* and four episodes of *The Rewatchables*, which revisits popular films. *The Ringer's* podcast network now includes 50 titles covering a wide range of topics, including cooking, Black culture and current events alongside lighter fare, like fantasy football, wrestling and reality TV.

MAKING DIVERSITY THE MOST IMPORTANT THING

Like many people, Simmons has been reflecting on his role in promoting diversity, both at *The Ringer* and more broadly across the industry. In June 2020, he addressed the topic on his podcast. "It's like football," he said to his listeners. "You judge a coach by your record. You judge me by my record, and my record wasn't good enough."

Simmons knew he wanted to establish a foundation after the Spotify sale but wasn't sure how to focus it. "It wasn't until I spoke to my friend J. A. Adande's sports journalism class at Northwestern that fall that I came up with the idea," he says. "We did a Zoom and the lack of diversity in the class was pretty jarring."

That experience inspired a series of gifts. At COM, the Simmons Family Scholarship is intended to provide tuition for four alumni of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) pursuing master's degrees in journalism; a similar gift to Northwestern's Medill School will provide scholarships in the sports journalism master's program. Simmons also donated to the Earl Monroe New Renaissance Basketball School, a charter high school in the Bronx, and is planning additional gifts.

"You can say [diversity] is one of the many things you care about, but sometimes you have to make it the *most* important thing you care about," Simmons says.

Simmons recognizes his privilege. He remembers a COM professor in a narrative nonfiction course, Mark Kramer. "He rocked my world. The stuff I learned in that class I've thought about for the rest of my career," he says. "Could that happen to the people who get the scholarship, where they meet somebody like that and it changes the trajectory of their life? I think that would be pretty cool." /

As Deborah D. Douglas was working her way up the ranks of American journalism, from the *Shore Line Times*, in Guilford, Connecticut, to the *Clarion-Ledger* in Jackson, Mississippi, to the *Chicago Sun-Times*, she was troubled by a sense that some people—people who looked like her—were, to use a word she’s coined, “depresenced” by the mainstream press, as if they’d never existed at all.

Now, Douglas is in a position to help change that. She’s the coeditor-in-chief of a new online multimedia platform, *The Emancipator*, a collaboration between the *Boston Globe* opinion team and BU’s Center for Antiracist Research. With another veteran Black journalist, her coeditor Amber Payne, she’s building something new in journalism. Expected to launch in mid-2022, *The Emancipator* aims to “resurrect and reimagine” the 19th-century American abolitionist newspapers that helped end slavery. *The Emancipator*’s goal is broad and bold: with the Black experience as a starting point, it hopes to reframe the national conversation around race and hasten racial justice through evidence-based opinion and ideas essays, videos, annotations and events produced by and with experts from academia and the community.

It’s a unique editorial structure. While Payne, who is a former managing editor at BET.com and executive producer of *Teen Vogue*, was hired by the *Globe*, Douglas is a

AN ESTABLISHED PRESENCE

**A CAREER IN TRADITIONAL
JOURNALISM HAS PREPARED
DEBORAH D. DOUGLAS
TO BREAK TRADITION
WITH *THE EMANCIPATOR***

By SARA RIMER

Photos by CIARA CROCKER

BU employee who works out of the Center for Antiracist Research, which was launched by scholar Ibram X. Kendi, the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities, in July 2020. And COM is currently recruiting for a new faculty role, an impact journalist, to create instruction and writing opportunities around social-justice issues such as racism and to work closely with Douglas and Payne in creating content for *The Emancipator*.

Douglas was born in Chicago’s West Side Austin community and began her schooling in post-uprising Detroit after her parents divorced. Her entrepreneur father ran an auto body shop; her mother worked for the federal government, most recently as a Social Security claims representative. They were part of the Great Migration: her father’s roots were in Mississippi; her mother’s family worked as sharecroppers in Tennessee, where Douglas spent part of her childhood with her grandmother in the small town of Covington. A family across the street from her grandmother, the Taylors, had their



own personal library and welcomed Douglas to read any books she wanted, by Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Maya Angelou and other Black writers. She remembers thinking, “When I grow up, I’m going to make sure that people know about people like this.”

That sense of mission, to tell the everyday stories of her community, has driven her career since she graduated from Northwestern University’s Medill School with a degree in journalism in 1989. In addition to working at a series of digital and print publications, she has served as the Eugene S. Pulliam Distinguished Visiting Professor of Journalism at DePauw University in Indiana, and as a senior leader at The OpEd Project, which amplifies underrepresented expert voices, and founding managing editor of *MLK50: Justice Through Journalism*, which covers poverty, power and policy. She is the author of the 2021 book *U.S. Civil Rights Trail: A Traveler’s Guide to the People, Places, and Events That Made the Movement*.

COM/365 talked with Douglas about her path through traditional journalism, her critique of it and her vision for *The Emancipator*.

COM/365: When did you decide on journalism?

Deborah D. Douglas: When I was eight. I liked to read and I wanted to be pretty and I liked to write, and I started looking around to see, “Well, who reads and writes and looks pretty?” And TV anchors look pretty. That was the kind of glamour I thought I could aspire to. I knew I would never be Diana Ross glamorous. I told my mom I wanted to be a TV anchor. My mom said, “Good, I think they call that journalism, you would be a journalist.” My mom always hyped me up.

How did newspapers figure in your life growing up?

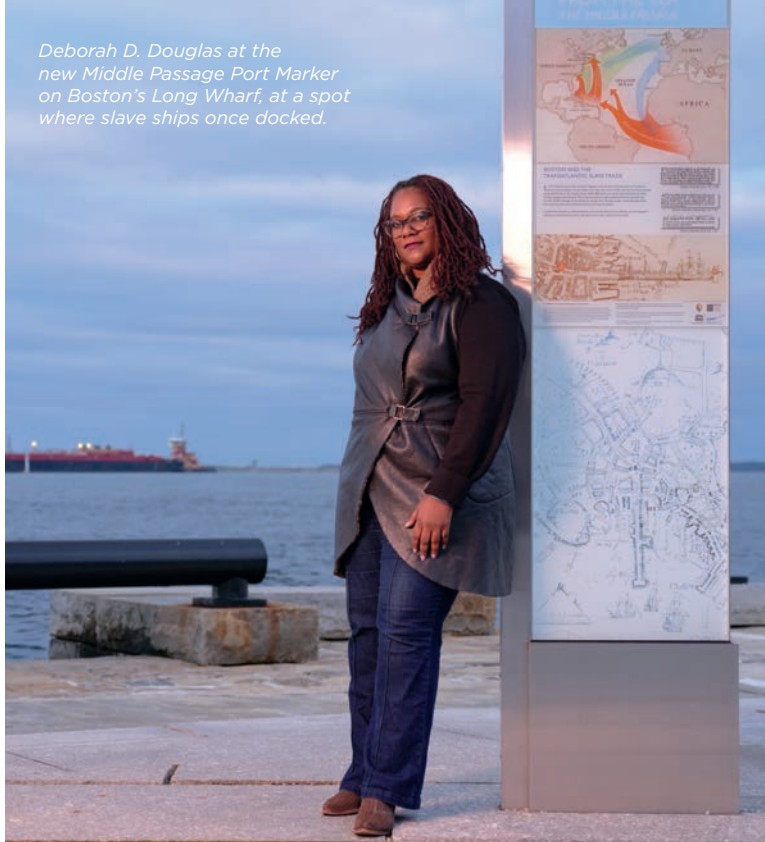
In Detroit, we read the *News* and the *Free Press*. When I went to Tennessee, I read the *Commercial Appeal* and the *Memphis Press-Scimitar*. We always read them late, because my grandmother didn’t have subscriptions—so people would give them to us.

In my family, the men would travel around from Chicago, Detroit, to the South, and they would pick up papers all along the way. We would sit down and read and talk about the issues. My uncles always invited me into their conversations about political issues and things like that.

You and others have talked about the problem of mainstream journalism framing the news through a white lens. Did you come across that when you were studying journalism?

We had a professor in a newswriting class who said, “Today there’s something going on in the city that’s really important. It’s a great story. Do you know what

Deborah D. Douglas at the new Middle Passage Port Marker on Boston’s Long Wharf, at a spot where slave ships once docked.



“WHAT IF PEOPLE HAVE A SENSATION THAT NOBODY EVER SEES THEM? THEY’RE JUST LIKE THIS INVISIBLE PERSON WHO’S SAYING, ‘I’M HERE! I’M HERE!’ AND SOCIETY, INSTITUTIONS, POLICIES NEVER REALLY SEE YOU. ... I CREATED A WORD FOR THAT: ‘DEPRESENCING.’”
—DEBORAH D. DOUGLAS

I’m talking about? It’s *really big*.” And for the life of me, I couldn’t figure out what he was talking about. What was that story he said everyone knew about? “It’s opening day for the baseball season!” I’m thinking, “That’s important to *you*, white man.”

But you didn’t say that?

No. I actually felt shame that I didn’t know it was opening day. I thought it was something wrong about the way that I had been acculturated. I spent years wondering, “Am I exposed enough? Good enough? Do I have the right kinds of experience to bring to this?” But I’m raised by a series of Black women, for all intents and purposes. I mean, my dad provided for me, but my day-to-day is Black women. They’re not focusing on opening day. Once, in freshman year, a professor said, “Write an expository story.” So I wrote a story about how to roll your hair. That was my way of introducing culture into the mix—because I *know* he’s never read a story about how a Black girl rolls her hair at night. I got a good grade.

Can you talk about the relationship between your experience in mainstream journalism and your vision for *The Emancipator*?

I’ve been doing this 30-plus years. I feel that the industry—legacy media—skews toward established power. There are people who you don’t really ever think about or really ever see. If the point of journalism is to be a pillar of democracy where everyone has a responsibility and a right to pursue a higher level of society and engagement, then why don’t we include everybody in the stories? Everybody’s stories matter.

It's really important to exercise good news judgment, and you gain your credibility for being that person in the newsroom who exercises good news judgment. Over time, if you are a person who feels like your community's stories haven't been fully rendered, or other communities' stories haven't been fully rendered, then you sort of begin to swallow those ideas and swallow your advocacy of those stories and why they're important—because you want to be credible in that newsroom space.

So, a part of the work that I've been doing for the past few years is my own personal sense of repair for being implicated in that system. Because we didn't always get it right—all of us, me included.

You wrote an essay in *Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America 1619–2019* about how Black women get "depresenced" in the mainstream media. Can you talk more about that?

What if people have a sensation that nobody *ever* sees them? They're just like this invisible person who's saying, "I'm here! I'm here!" And society, institutions, policies never really see you. But you're here, living, breathing, trying to thrive. I created a word for that: "depresencing."

I centered that around Black women's experience intentionally, because I feel like there's a very special way that society fails to render Black women in spaces and narratives. I've been in rooms where people look right through me.

You and your coeditor, Amber Payne, have said you want *The Emancipator* to move beyond just talking about race and engage in "solutions journalism." Would you expand on that?

We don't want to just point out problems. We want to engage solutions practice—which looks around the country, around the world, at people who are addressing the same issues. We want to point out how those people are pursuing answers, and whether or not the answers are working. Rigorous solutions journalism is transparent about the fact that sometimes solutions have limitations. But at the very least, we can show that people are purposing themselves to find solutions to some of the world's most pressing social issues.

That's been missing in journalism. People will turn on the TV or pick up a periodical, and feel demoralized because it's just about the problems. Watchdog journalism is so important. It's so big and it's so muscular—and it's so male, to be honest! And sometimes watchdog journalism can be demoralizing, because it's like the big "gotcha."

Can you give examples of how solutions journalism will look in *The Emancipator*?

We're going to be writing about how systems work. For example, I just read Dorothy Brown's book, *The Whiteness of Wealth*. And she deconstructs how the tax code cheats Black people. She identified a problem. We're interested in illuminating that, because I think a lot of us operate under the assumption that the tax code is not racist, right?

But I'm also interested in the policy space, or the political space: Who is working on solutions to that? That's a big, hard thing to do. But somebody somewhere must have some good ideas about how to make that work. How can people know what to ask for if they don't know what the issue is?

And we want insights from community members, too—because they're experts on many, many things. We want to elevate expertise. /

This interview was edited for clarity and brevity.

COM FOR GOOD

A focus on addressing society's biggest challenges has sparked new programs across the college

Building a relationship with *The Emancipator* and the BU Center for Antiracist Research is just one way that COM is emphasizing what Dean Mariette DiChristina calls "communication for good."

"Society's greatest challenges—including issues around justice, disinformation, sustainability, global health—require multidisciplinary solutions," DiChristina ('86) says. "Communication is the bridge that helps build understanding across research disciplines, across leadership in policy and business and across communities."

In 2020, the college wrote communication for good into its newest strategic plan, aiming to increase engagement with science, combat systemic racism, highlight issues of social justice and promote corporate social responsibility. One year later, a number of initiatives are underway. You can read about SciComms on page 4, and the search for an impact journalist for the faculty in the accompanying profile of Deborah D. Douglas. Here are three other ways that COM is promoting communication for good:

Civic Science Fellowship

Funding from the Rita Allen Foundation provides support for Michelle Amazeen, associate professor and director of the Communication Research Center (see page 5), and a team of colleagues to study the ways that marginalized communities engage with science misinformation online and how best to reduce misperceptions.

Justice Media Co-Lab

This cross-disciplinary course is a collaboration among COM, the BU Faculty of Computing & Data Sciences and Spark! Teams of journalism and computer science students conduct data-focused investigations and report on stories that will shed light on important issues of justice, from police racism to environmental inequity. Read more at bu.edu/com/articles/journalism-by-the-numbers.

Black Media Symposium

COM and the COM DEI Alumni Advisory Group are planning a symposium, "Black Media: Reflecting on the Past and Envisioning the Future," in October 2022, at BU's Howard Thurman Center for Common Ground. —Marc Chalufour

The background of the entire page is a sunburst pattern. It consists of numerous thin, radiating lines in shades of orange and cream, creating a bright, energetic effect. The lines are thicker near the center and become thinner as they radiate outwards.

The **INTERN** **FACTOR**

CURRENT STUDENTS AND ALUMNI ON
THE VALUE OF INTERNSHIPS—AND THE
DONOR SUPPORT TO PURSUE THEM

By MARA SASSOON
Illustrations by DANIEL DIOSDADO



hen Michelle Sullivan was a senior at COM, she landed an internship at the former Boston-based PR and marketing firm Bishoff Solomon Communications. The agency, run by alums Janey Bishoff (CAS'75) and Helene Solomon (CGS'72, COM'74), gave her invaluable experience. "Intern-

ships are one of the most important things you can do while you're an undergrad," says Sullivan. "You're getting hands-on, real-world learning that helps you apply what you're actually doing in the classroom."

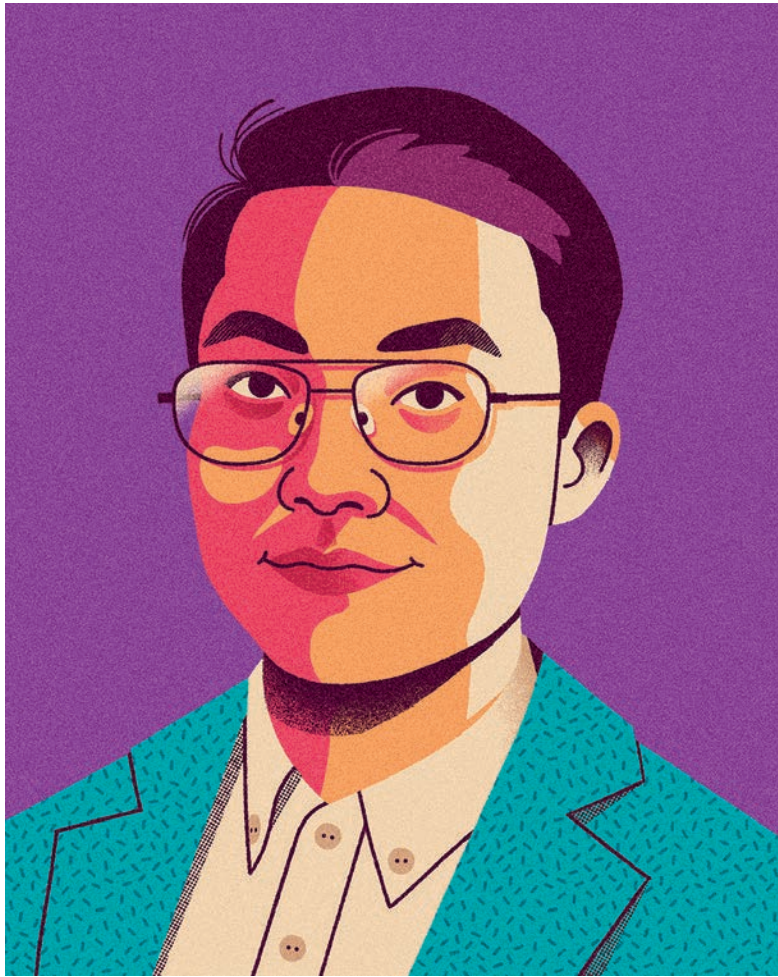
But beyond the educational advantages, the internship provided Sullivan ('95) with another benefit: her first job. Upon graduation, she was hired as an account executive at Bishoff Solomon. After a few years there, she joined The Boston Beer Company's marketing and communications department, where she climbed the ranks to chief communications officer and head of marketing. Today, she is the associate dean of diversity, equity and inclusion and a professor of advertising at COM and runs her own consulting practice, SM&C.

Sullivan, who is also the internship coordinator for COM's advertising department, is not alone in her experience. "This is only my fourth year of teaching, but I can think of a number of students who got offered their first full-time position based off of a place where they interned," she says.

But taking on an internship often isn't so simple. "Many students are forced to make the choice to supplement their income to fund their education—to buy their books and to pay for their housing—or to get that professional experience through an internship program that pays nothing or very little," Sullivan says.

A recent study by the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that 43 percent of internships at for-profit companies are unpaid. For many COM students, internships aren't possible without support. Fortunately, a growing number of alumni donors target their gifts for this purpose (see sidebar on page 22).

COM/365 spoke with current students and recent alumni who, like Sullivan, had impactful internship experiences—many thanks to the support of alumni donors.



RUIXIN ZHU ('19)

Originally from southwestern China, Ruixin Zhu came to COM for its Master of Arts in Emerging Media Studies. “The program trained me in areas that are not only technical, including data analysis and website design, but also philosophical, in the way it dove deep into the complex relationship between human beings and social media,” he says.

A few months after graduating, he landed a year-long PR internship with PerkinElmer, a global biotechnology company headquartered in Waltham, Massachusetts. Zhu credits Heather Fink, director of career services at COM, with helping him find the internship. “When I first heard about the idea of networking, I was intimidated. I was terrified by the time constraint of an elevator pitch, concerned about how empty my résumé was, and even self-conscious about not speaking English as fluently as native speakers,” he says. “However, with Heather’s training, I learned to be confident and believe in my capabilities.”

Zhu says that although it was tough learning all of the healthcare and science jargon common in the industry, he picked things up quickly. He helped pitch to publications, monitored media coverage and translated articles from English to Chinese. “I was lucky to have a great team that was supportive and knowledgeable to help me develop my PR skills.”

Those team members recognized his growth. When the internship ended, they hired Zhu as a PR associate and sponsored his H1B visa. A recent project had him facilitating a podcast interview that involved people based in the United States, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. “Being able to participate fully in that, from pitching a media outlet with an idea to seeing that result [with the podcast], was fascinating,” he says. “What I love about my job is how it is not only focused on the US but also connects the globe. As a foreign employee, it’s a blessing to work at a place where internationality is celebrated and valued.”

ALUMNI ASSISTANCE

A number of alums have targeted their financial gifts to support internships. Here are some of the funds currently helping COM students pursue their professional dreams.

The **COM Fellows Fund**, launched in fall 2020, is funded by an anonymous donor. The program is available to juniors and seniors, and provides students with up to \$10,000 each to pursue positions at media companies. The fund will support 10 interns in sum-

mer 2022. As part of the program, COM has developed partnerships with leading media companies, including Gray Television, America’s Test Kitchen and WBUR, which reserve internships for fellows.

Ray Kotcher ('83), the former CEO and chair of Ketchum and a professor of the practice at COM, established the **Kotcher-Ketchum Scholarship and Internship**, which is awarded to two students each year, ideally from underrepresented groups. The scholarship includes

RACHEL REX (COM'19, CAS'19)

Rachel Rex, a double major in communication and political science, became passionate about reforming the US immigration system through her classes at BU. She wanted to use her two majors to become engaged in and support immigrant and refugee rights. So a communications internship at the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition (MIRA), a nonprofit dedicated to promoting the rights of immigrants and refugees, was a perfect fit.

"I found the on-the-ground work that MIRA does inspiring, and I was interested in nonprofit public relations," Rex says. "Unfortunately, many grassroots organizations [like MIRA] aren't able to offer a paid internship." Rex applied for and was awarded the Marcy Syms Community Service Fellowship in Communication.

At MIRA, Rex helped to plan an advocacy event at the Massachusetts State House, maintained donor databases and edited the organization's website. She says the internship enhanced her studies—she was simultaneously taking a class on immigration policy for which she wrote a final paper that compared US and Canadian laws. "While I was doing this research, I could see the effects of the US' patchwork immigration system firsthand through the work MIRA does."

It also prepared her for a PR internship that summer with 617MediaGroup, a communications firm that specializes in nonprofit and labor union clients. By the end of the summer, the agency had hired Rex as an account executive. Two years later, she's an account director. "I love the work I do and feel that all of my internship experiences have led me to the role I'm in now."

**"I LOVE THE WORK I DO
AND FEEL THAT ALL OF MY
INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCES
HAVE LED ME TO THE ROLE
I'M IN NOW." —RACHEL REX**



tuition assistance as well as a paid, for-credit internship at Ketchum, one of the world's leading PR firms.

Marcy Syms ('75), president of the Sy Syms Foundation, an organization her father founded in 1985 to support education, science and the arts, created the **Sy Syms Foundation Internship Fund**, which provides stipends to female COM students who are pursuing internships in the nonprofit sector or other community-based opportunities.

Colleen McCreary ('95), a Silicon Valley-based human resources executive at Credit Karma, established the **McCreary Family Fund** in 2018; now that it has reached maturity, the fund will begin supporting COM interns this year. (Read more about McCreary on page 30.)

Information about these and other scholarships is available at bu.edu/com/career-services.



ALEXANDRA ROSS ('22)

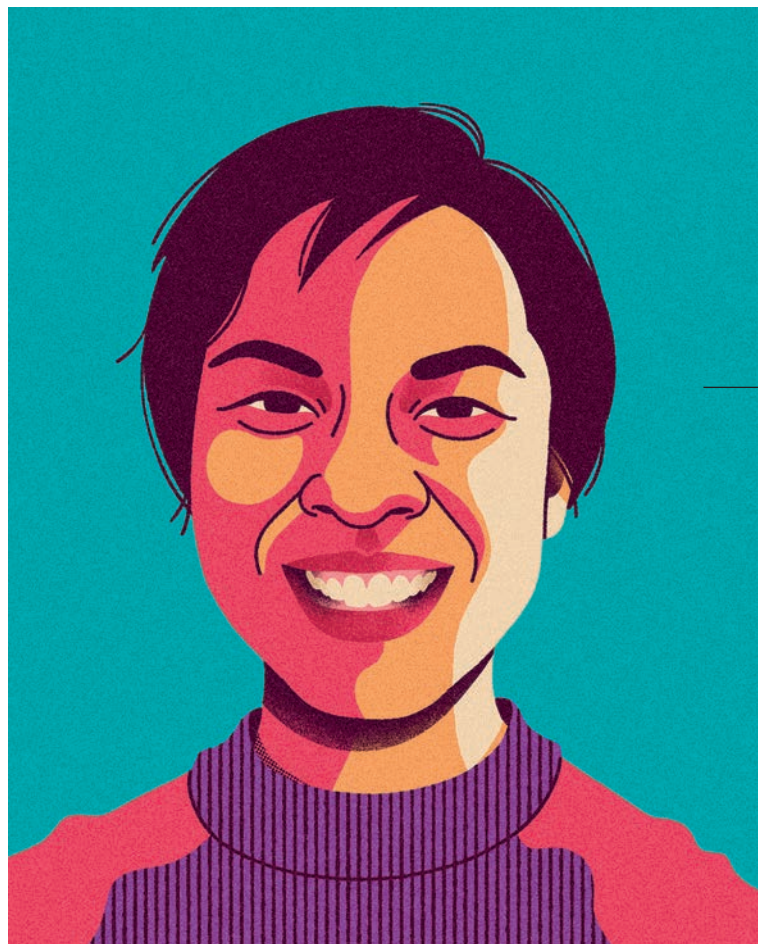
For Alexandra Ross, an internship with the *Today Show* was a dream long in the making. Six years ago, she stood with her mother outside *Today's* studio, on Rockefeller Plaza, holding a sign that read, “Natalie, can I do the news with you?” It worked. Ross was invited into the studio to read some of the day’s headlines alongside then-anchor Natalie Morales. Fast-forward to summer 2021, and Ross, one of 10 COM Fellows, landed the dream internship, during which she conducted research on the program’s guests to help producers prepare segments, assisted in recording Zoom interviews and worked the overnight shift during the Olympics, transcribing audio and logging footage.

On the last day of the internship, she even had the opportunity to speak with her role model, *Today* anchor Savannah Guthrie, who joined a Zoom call with the interns after wrapping up the day’s broadcast.

“I’ll always look back at that as the summer that changed my life. Interning at *Today* kick-started my career in a way I could’ve only dreamed of. The connections I made with the people who work there are invaluable.”

The *Today* internship also opened up another opportunity: a fall internship with *E! News* (like the *Today Show*, *E!* is owned by NBCUniversal). At *E!*, Ross interviewed celebrities over Zoom and wrote accompanying articles for *eonline.com*, including a piece on *Harry Potter* star Evanna Lynch’s new memoir. “The intersection of the broadcasting and production experience from *Today* and the reporting and interviewing experience from *E!* is essentially what I want to do for the rest of my life,” she says.

**“I LOVE CRAFTING
STORIES—THE EMOTION,
THE JOURNEY, THE HONOR
AND PRIVILEGE OF
SEEING SOMETHING
DEVELOP OVER TIME.”**
—KRISTEN CHIN



WILL ANDRONICO ('22)

Like Ross, Will Andronico was a summer 2021 COM Fellow. As a television development intern with VICE Media, whose shows include the documentary series *Dark Side of the 90s* and the news program *Vice News Tonight*, he attended pitch meetings, observed how budgets and schedules for shows were developed and helped examine Nielsen ratings and other analytics to inform future show development.

Andronico says the experience gave him “a holistic view of how unscripted programming is developed. I was able to see the process of creative development, budgeting and scheduling and content insights, all of which are important areas to have a grasp on for any job I may have after I graduate.”

The summer with VICE helped narrow down what kind of job he’d like to pursue in the future too. “My strengths lie in the production and the data and analytics side of things. This internship helped me realize I would be great at helping creative people build their project into something that’s really successful.”



KRISTEN CHIN ('21)

Before deciding to pursue her master’s degree in journalism, Kristen Chin worked at a tech start-up. But she kept coming back to storytelling in her pursuits outside of work, from improv and acting to public speaking and writing. Eventually she realized she wanted to turn that passion into a career. “I love crafting stories—the emotion, the journey, the honor and privilege of seeing something develop over time,” Chin says.


At COM, she took a special interest in video and digital media and looked for an internship where she could explore those formats. In June 2020, she accepted a production internship at the Boston public radio station, GBH. That internship led to another—and then another—working for GBH’s news and documentary platform, WORLD Channel, and Studio Six, its national programming and lifestyles unit. Over one year, she pitched and researched stories, coordinated travel and managed postproduction tasks, including fact-checking and time-coding scripts. She also helped organize the production department’s first diversity, equity and inclusion workshop.

She shares this takeaway from her time as an intern: “Carry yourself like a full-time employee: contribute and be present at meetings, speak up and get to know people.” This mindset certainly helped Chin—at the end of the year, GBH hired her as a full-time production assistant. /



**GUO, LEI USES DATA SCIENCE TO STUDY THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN
JOURNALISM, SOCIAL MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY**

By ANDREW THURSTON



The mosquitoes are fighting—and biting—back. After years of being flooded with insecticides, the tiny, nibbling flies are becoming resistant to our chemical defenses. So scientists are testing an alternative to the chemical sprays: releasing genetically modified (GM) mosquitoes that only produce nonbiting offspring.

It's a controversial approach. When plans to release GM mosquitoes in Florida first made headlines, they ran into stiff public opposition—even forcing local referendum votes—as fears swirled about unintended consequences harming people and local ecosystems.

But, just as with other stories rich with scientific detail and social debates—think COVID-19 vaccines—where people get their news, and what news they trust, matters.

“People might say, ‘The news media don’t have any facts anymore, people don’t read news, they check out social media,’” says Guo, Lei, an associate professor of emerging media studies, who lists her family name first as is customary in her native China. Those assumptions, she’s found, don’t always hold true.

An expert on the interplay between the media—especially social media—and public opinion, Guo uses big data research methods to study trust in journalism and how social media giants like Facebook and Twitter impact democracy. By leveraging computing power, she can sort through thousands—sometimes millions—of articles and posts to better understand mass media’s influence.

To figure out where the public was turning to get the buzz on GM mosquitoes, Guo compared online news coverage of the story with the debate on Twitter. With Weirui Wang, an associate professor at Florida International University, she looked at 464 news articles and thousands of tweets, finding Twitter had an “inadequate discussion of risk” when it came to the modified mosquitoes.

While what they called elite (like the *New York Times*) and emerging (*HuffPost*) news outlets plunged into reporting on topics as diverse as experimental dangers, cost-effectiveness and ethics, the Twitter debate remained mostly stuck on the potential health impacts. “To obtain a well-rounded perspective about an issue,” wrote Guo and Wang, who published their findings in the *Journal of Risk Research* in August 2020, “people may still want to access online news sites as their main source of information instead of relying only on Twitter.”

And what’s true for people scrambling to understand GM mosquitoes may also say something about how their views are shaped on other topics, like the coronavirus, gun violence or presidential elections—topics Guo has also studied.

A trained journalist *and* a founding member of BU’s Faculty of Computing & Data Sciences, Guo notes a common thread between her work as a reporter and as a researcher: “We’re curious,” she says. “The job of a journalist is to gather data, interview people to learn their thoughts. As a researcher, I’m doing the same thing, but the method I use to get an answer is more systematic.”

As well as studying media impact, she’s developing tools to help journalists find stories in the world’s data—and navigate a polarized world.

A BILLION TWEETS

A decade or two ago, studying media impact was relatively straightforward—if a little laborious. Researchers would watch a handful of core news channels or shows, sift through newspaper articles and poll audiences and readers for their views on different subjects. Then came aggregators and blogs and podcasts and Twitter. Not to mention the proliferation of fake news. Now, researchers can access billions of tweets—500 million new missives are posted on Twitter every day, according to Internet Live Stats—not just for news, but to gauge ever-changing shifts and patterns in public opinion.

“When I started my journey in this field, we still used a lot of traditional methods, for instance manual content analysis,” says Guo, who began studying media effects—an academic term for mass media’s influence—as a graduate student research assistant at the University of Texas at Austin. “But there’s no way for me to go through a billion tweets, so I started to explore computational methods.”

Working with computer scientists, she’s helped design and perfect software that can analyze streams of data. For instance, in a recent study examining the link between how media outlets frame stories on gun violence and the issue’s prominence among midterm election voters, Guo used a computer program to evaluate 42,917 news articles.

She was looking to see if there was any difference in influence between articles that just reported on a single incident, one shooting or the impact on one victim—what researchers call an episodic frame—and those stories weighing bigger societal issues and questions, called a thematic frame. Instead of manually sorting all the articles by their angle, as well as by outlet type—conservative, liberal, nonpartisan, mainstream—Guo and her fellow BU researchers taught a computer program to do the work for them.

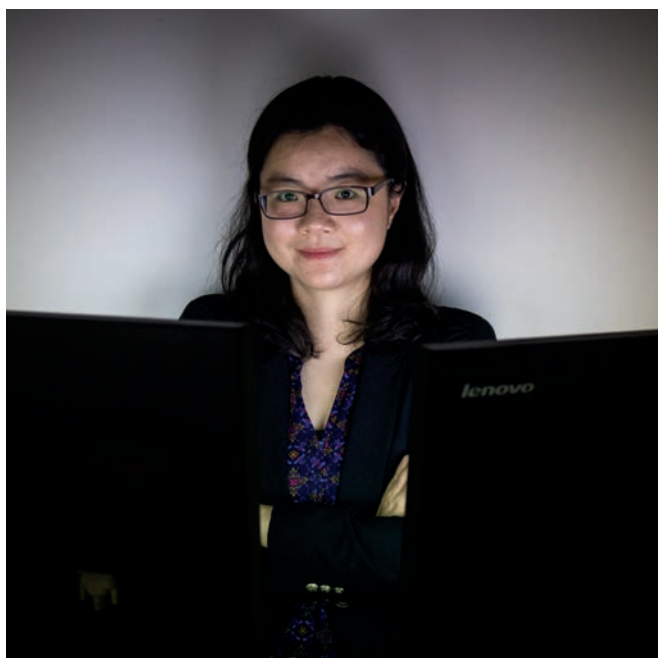
“We start with a sample of articles and manually go through them and classify them,” says Guo. “Then we use methods in computer science, like machine learning, to train a machine model to classify all of the unlabeled data.”

The program, nicknamed BERT—for Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers—provided them with a much more comprehensive dataset than humans alone could amass. The researchers then combined that information with the results of a general population survey that asked people about their media use habits and views on gun violence.

“We correlate the two types of data to see whether exposure to certain media or certain media’s framing will influence how they think,” says Guo.

They’re techniques she’s also applied to the study of COVID and fake news, tracking differences between pandemic coverage in various countries and the power of misinformation to sway public debate. In one COVID project, Guo and her team analyzed the topics making headlines in countries as diverse as the United States, Egypt, China and Germany. They then compiled all of the information into an interactive world map (covid19.philemerge.com), allowing users to drill down and see how the news focus shifted in each country over the first three months of the pandemic.

“THE JOB OF A JOURNALIST IS TO GATHER DATA, INTERVIEW PEOPLE TO LEARN THEIR THOUGHTS. AS A RESEARCHER, I’M DOING THE SAME THING, BUT THE METHOD I USE TO GET AN ANSWER IS MORE SYSTEMATIC.” —GUO, LEI



Cydney Scott

BY LEVERAGING COMPUTING POWER, [GUO] CAN SORT THROUGH THOUSANDS—SOMETIMES MILLIONS—OF ARTICLES AND POSTS TO BETTER UNDERSTAND MASS MEDIA'S INFLUENCE.

THE POWER OF JOURNALISM

By combing through such rich datasets, Guo can often uncover nuances that might have been missed by comparable studies in the past. It also gives her much more robust results. The gun violence study, which was published in 2021 in *Mass Communication and Society*, found that mainstream media—the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*—can still shift opinion, even on heavily polarized issues. But there was an asterisk: although those legacy outlets could move the views of conservatives by using an episodic frame, thematic stories tended to be a dud in changing opinions.

“People already have their positions, they’re tired of the arguments,” says Guo. “It’s really hard to change their opinions, but if you show them incidents or individual stories, maybe that will. Those kinds of articles have more of an emotional appeal.”

On the flip side, seeing an article in the partisan media—even an emotion-packed one—could cement the views of that same conservative, leading them to believe gun violence was less of an important issue. Overall, says Guo, it shows that despite the rise of social media, “journalists do have the power to change people’s minds.”

In a new project, she’s applying that same nuanced approach to the life cycle of local news stories after publication, analyzing how articles grounded in fact can become twisted into fiction-filled fake news. In October 2021, Guo and a team of researchers at BU, Temple University and the University of Illinois at Chicago were awarded a \$750,000 National Science Foundation grant to use data science techniques—including natural language processing and network analysis—to watch articles as they’re tweeted and retweeted, aggregated and rewritten.

News outlets might have a good handle on the immediate impact and readership of an article, says Guo, but not how the story continues to evolve. And, she says, what happens to a story after it hits the web can determine its impact, and the public’s trust

in the media overall: “Journalists don’t have control over their news after they publish it. After several layers of transmission, a good story can become something fake or misleading.”

USER-FRIENDLY DATA SCIENCE

Guo hopes her work can give journalists new insights, but is also working on software and other tools they can use to increase the impact of their reporting. The projects, like her teaching—she leads courses on computational and communication research, communication theories and the design of interactive digital products—aim to democratize access to computational methods. One, just in its early stages, will detect bias in articles—that’s being developed with the technology incubator and experiential learning lab, BU Spark! Another aims to give all reporters access to the computer-powered big data analysis Guo uses in her research.


“We’re developing a user-friendly tool, so they can upload their data—it could be media content, news articles, political speeches—and in a few clicks they will have their results,” says Guo. “If they have tons of data and want to see the topics that emerge, they don’t need to have any computer science skills or knowledge—they can just follow our instructions.”

The open-source program will be available for free online. In a world in which processing and understanding big data have become central to so many jobs, from journalist and social media manager to marketer and user experience designer, the program has the potential to benefit anyone looking for trends or studying sentiment analysis.

But Guo also recognizes computing’s limits. Sometimes, she admits, you just have to work through a problem the old-fashioned way—though perhaps her tools can spare you some shoe leather.

“Human reasoning is still very, very important—we cannot rely on machines for everything,” she says. “Data science just provides us with a new tool to understand the world.” /





THE

HUMAN RESOURCES EXECUTIVE
COLLEEN McCREARY USED HER
PUBLIC RELATIONS TRAINING
TO HELP CREDIT KARMA
THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

By MARC CHALUFOUR

Photos by GABRIELA HASBUN

PEOPLE

PERSON

Midway through the final season of the HBO comedy *Silicon Valley*, tensions mount between management and human resources. The show, which depicts the successes and stumbles of fictional start-up Pied Piper, takes the workplace humor of *The Office* and *Office Space* and drops it in California's ultracom-

petitive tech hub. When Tracy, the HR director, tells managers Guilfoyle and Monica that their interpersonal skills score poorly in her performance-rating algorithm, they race to befriend their employees and skew the data—or crash the system.

It's an absurd scene that plays off familiar workplace anxieties. "That's good comedy—it's the real world stretched a little bit so you don't think it's real," says Colleen McCreary, the chief people, places and publicity officer at personal finance company Credit Karma. "The reality is, all those stories [on the show] are legit."

She should know: McCreary ('95) is Tracy. Or, rather, Tracy is based on McCreary, who consulted with writers and producers for the show's sixth season. As technical advisor, she drew on 20-plus years of HR and start-up expertise to help them add a sheen of authenticity to their story lines—and punch lines.

McCreary has worked for a software giant (Microsoft) and an online gaming start-up (Zynga); she has helped new companies expand and established companies merge. In that time, she's gained an appreciation for the ways that human resources can help each of a company's elements operate harmoniously—and, increasingly, how a link between internal and external communications helps that happen. In February 2020, when she assumed responsibility for the company's PR and social media—just as COVID-19 began to spread in the US and Credit Karma prepared to announce its acquisition by Intuit—she was prepared to help the company weather an unprecedented confluence of events.

THE INS AND OUTS OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

When McCreary joined Credit Karma in 2018 as the company's chief people officer, her first challenges were familiar ones to someone with tech industry HR experience: helping guide the company's growth—they now have 1,300 employees in three countries—and overhauling compensation to remove inconsistencies and bias.

Since 2020, though, McCreary's primary challenge has become communication: specifically, keeping all those employees—many concerned for their jobs and their health—informed of fast-changing events. Plus, McCreary says, the employee experience is increasingly a media story—a trend accelerated by the pandemic, with attention focused on how companies have adapted. Think of stories about successful pivots to remote work or, at the opposite extreme, of COVID outbreaks at crowded meatpacking plants. The workers, not the products, became the focus.

"Your internal narrative really has to match your external narrative," she says. "If you don't do that well, you're going to have a lot of issues with your employees." For Credit Karma, founded by CEO Kenneth Lin (CAS'98) with the mission of helping millions of people with free financial services, that means making sure that corporate ideal of building equality reflects inward as well. To ensure that was happening, McCreary, who studied PR at COM, doubled down on her communication background early in the pandemic. "COM does a great job teaching writing and communication skills that you're going to use for the rest of your life, no matter what path you end up tripping down," she says.

McCreary began writing a company-wide email every Sunday to check in and provide staff with some certainty during an unusually ambiguous time. That message remains a weekly routine and has evolved into her channel for providing transparency through a series of challenging management decisions, including potential layoffs, the sale to Intuit and vaccine mandates.

When revenues from lenders and other credit companies were cut in half early in the pandemic, areas like recruiting were paused, leaving many employees without work to do. McCreary helped keep everyone busy by moving people around, trying to capitalize on interests and skills while waiting for the global economy to begin churning again. "I needed to give people something to do," she says. "Contrary to a lot of discussions around unemployment, people like working—they need work and structure."

McCreary helped Credit Karma launch a series of new projects. One, a COVID recovery road map, drew on Credit Karma's financial expertise and directed members to stimulus programs, credit-deferral options and other personal economic resources needed to weather the pandemic. A voting road map encouraged civic engagement and attempted to cut through misinformation and make voter registration easier.

PATHS NOT FOLLOWED

When McCreary arrived at BU, she was certain she knew her career goal: politics. "I was going to work on campaigns, and I was going to change the world," she says. An internship on Senator Ted Kennedy's (D-Mass.) (Hon.'70) 1994 campaign was the perfect opportunity. And McCreary hated it.

"I got to do a lot of really cool things, but it was miserable. People were unhappy," she says. "All anybody could think about was, 'What's the next job?'" So McCreary tried other internships, one with a political consultant, another in a PR agency. She also joined student government, gave campus tours and



“People give to the things that really impacted them. If I hadn’t had those internships, I probably would’ve made a lot more career missteps.”

—COLLEEN MCCREARY

worked as a resident assistant. And she realized that she liked helping people on a more micro level. “I loved connecting with people and helping them make their decisions,” she says. After graduation, she headed to Columbia University for a master’s in higher education and researched graduate school retention of women in engineering and computer science programs for her thesis. A friend noticed her research and said, “You’re good with technology people,” and encouraged McCreary to pursue a corporate rather than academic career. “The next thing you know, I had a job at Microsoft doing college recruiting—that was the beginning.”

From there, she continued with college recruiting at video game publisher Electronic Arts until she was promoted to director of corporate human resources and diversity. Then she joined Zynga as its chief people officer and helped it grow from 130 to 4,000 employees. Her Silicon Valley career path was set. “I fell in love with not just the products we were making but how they were being made and who was making them,” she says.

Silicon Valley is a long way from the Washington, D.C., life that McCreary once envisioned. She’s grateful for the intern-

ships that helped her decide which career to pursue—and which to avoid—and realizes how lucky she was to find paid positions. So, when she established the McCreary Family Fund in 2018, she designed it to help future COM students get those same experiences. That fund, which reached maturity this year, supports students in unpaid internships. “People give to the things that really impacted them,” she says. “If I hadn’t had those internships, I probably would’ve made a lot more career missteps.”

PEOPLE FIRST

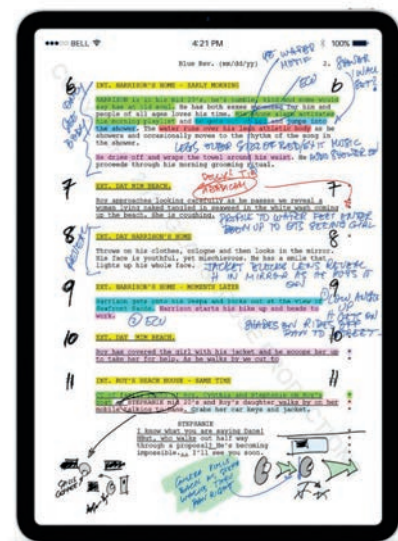
McCreary knows her profession has a sometimes unflattering reputation—due in part to Hollywood depictions like Tracy. “People think the HR lady is either Snow White or Darth Vader,” she says. But her version of the real-life role has a little less dramatic flair. “I am like the product manager of the systems and tools that run the company,” she told *First Round Review*, an online business-to-business publication, in June 2021.

That might sound like a dry job description, but it’s also hard to imagine a more important role in the two years since the pandemic began. After the financial crunch of early 2020, Credit Karma rebounded. Its acquisition by Intuit was finalized in December and, in early 2021, the company had its most profitable quarter ever. And Comparably, which analyzes company culture and compensation, gave Credit Karma an A+ for its workplace culture after 86 percent of polled employees said they were proud to work there.

To McCreary, keeping the company’s internal and external communications in sync is critical to past and future success because it keeps everyone happy. “It really is about the people—the people you’re going to work with and who you spend your time with,” she says. “It’s why people stay at companies, and it certainly is why people end up leaving companies.” /

TERRIER HEADLINES

From the Emmy Awards to the Indy 500, COM alumni had much to celebrate in 2021



Steve Vitolo ('05) received an Engineering Emmy Award for Scriptation, his script management app.

October 21 was a good day for screenwriter Steve Vitolo.

The Television Academy bestowed an Engineering Emmy Award on Scriptation, the script-annotation app used on many TV shows and movies. Vitolo ('05) is CEO and cofounder of Scriptation LLC. The same day, by coincidence, shooting wrapped on *The List*, an indie film comedy Vitolo cowrote. It's his biggest success in a writing career that also boasts TV credits for episodes of *black-ish* and other shows.

"I wanted to be a TV writer, and I've had a little bit of success in that, but I never thought I'd win an Emmy for engineering," Vitolo says.

The app was created by Vitolo, Zakary Selbert (Questrom '05), Scriptation's chief investment officer, and Felipe Mendez, its chief technology officer. Alexandra Diantgikis ('15) is the marketing and social media manager.

The time-, labor-, and paper-saving app for phones and tablets has been used

by stars and staffers on thousands of shows and movies, including actors Kevin Bacon, Fred Savage and Rob Morrow (an early investor). It has been downloaded more than 100,000 times. Productions that have bought it for their whole teams include the current *Foundation* series and *Saturday Night Live*. *Game of Thrones* was also a customer.

The idea was born a few years ago when Vitolo was working as script coordinator for the ABC hit comedy *black-ish* and marveling—not in a good way—at all the paper Hollywood wastes with nightly script revisions being distributed to everyone in the cast and crew of every show and movie.

Beyond that sustainability issue, there was a workflow problem. Everyone from movie stars and directors to cinematographers and costume designers scribbles notes on their scripts. And every time there's another revision, they all have to copy over their notes. With Scriptation,

it's easy to transfer all those notes from one PDF to the next.

The app, one of eight Engineering Emmy winners in 2021, received this citation: "Scriptation automates the tedious process of transferring handwritten notes, annotations, and verbal comments to a script and redistributing to all departments. ... Scriptation has become a popular application, adding efficiency through environmentally conscious workflows and clear communication in today's production environment."

As Scriptation continues to grow, Vitolo is in postproduction on *The List*, which stars Halston Sage (*Prodigal Son*) as Abby, a woman who is about to get married and finds out her fiancé has slept with a celebrity from his "free pass" list. So Abby decides to pursue a celebrity from her own list. The film is slated for release in mid-2022.

"I had a good month," Vitolo says. —Joel Brown



Bonnie Hammer (CGS'69, COM'71, Wheelock'75, Hon.'17) received *Variety's* inaugural TV Legacy Award in recognition of her accomplishments as an innovator, leader and mentor. Hammer, who began her career working on Boston-area shows including *This Old House*, moved into cable television in the 1980s. Starting as a programming executive for Lifetime, Hammer went on to play pivotal roles at USA Network, SYFY, Bravo, Oxygen and E!, among other networks. She is now vice chair at NBCUniversal.



George Kliavkoff ('89) was named commissioner of the Pac-12, one of the strongest athletic conferences in the NCAA. Kliavkoff had previously been president of entertainment and sports at MGM Resorts, where he oversaw live events and sports gambling. Prior to that, he was chief digital officer at NBCUniversal, where he helped to launch Hulu, and an executive at Major League Baseball Advanced Media. Among the challenges of his new job will be negotiating media rights deals for the conference.

Liz Patrick (CGS'91, COM'93) became just the fifth director of *Saturday Night Live* in the show's 47-season history. Patrick, who won five Emmy Awards during seven years as a director and producer of *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, succeeds longtime director Don Roy King, who stepped down after 15 years.





The *Los Angeles Times* named **Kevin Merida ('79)** as its executive editor. Merida was previously a senior vice president at ESPN and editor-in-chief of *The Undefeated*, the network's race, sports and culture website. Prior to ESPN, Merida spent more than three decades as a newspaper reporter and editor, including 22 years at the *Washington Post*.

Beth Paretta ('95) made history on Memorial Day Weekend, when Paretta Autosport competed in the 2021 Indianapolis 500. The team featured a woman driver, Simona De Silvestro, and the sport's first majority-woman pit crew. Although De Silvestro was eventually forced to drop out because of a technical issue, the team passed its opening test of the day, the race's first pit stop—which went smoothly. “Everyone was sort of holding their breath, expecting either greatness or failure,” says Paretta, “When Simona pulled out of the box, the crowd erupted.”



D. Brenton Simons (CGS'86, COM'88, Wheelock'94) received the first John Adams Medal for Outstanding Merit and Lifetime Achievement in Institutional Leadership from the Sons of the Revolution in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Simons is president and CEO of the New England Historic Genealogical Society, the first genealogical organization in the world, where the PBS series *Finding Your Roots* with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., is filmed.



Carmen Fields ('73), who began her journalism career reporting on Boston's 1970s school busing crisis for the *Boston Globe* before transitioning to television news, was honored as a Roxbury Legend at Roxbury Community College's Celebration of Black Women in Broadcast Media. Fields summoned the words of playwright Lorraine Hansberry in her speech: "Write about our people, tell our story. You have something glorious to draw upon, begging for attention. Don't pass it up. Use it. The nation needs your gifts." Read more about Fields at bu.edu/com/articles/carmen-fields.



Documentary filmmaker **Martin Doblmeier ('80)**, whose work focuses on religion, faith and spirituality, released his latest film on public television. *Spiritual Audacity: The Abraham Joshua Heschel Story* is about an influential Jewish theologian who fled the Nazis and became a pivotal figure in the American civil rights and antiwar movements. Read more of Doblmeier's story at bu.edu/com/articles/faith.



Michael Williams ('79), *Queer Eye* executive producer, picked up his fourth consecutive Emmy in the Outstanding Structured Reality Program category. The Netflix series, a reboot of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, which ran on Bravo from 2003 to 2007, focuses on a team of gay people giving fashion makeovers and lifestyle advice to guests. "People love to see the 'before and after,'" Williams says. "They love to see growth, both spiritual and mental."

President Joe Biden nominated **Gigi Sohn ('83)** to be a commissioner of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Sohn is a longtime advocate for open, affordable communication networks, especially broadband internet access. She most recently served as a distinguished fellow at Georgetown Law Institute for Technology Law & Policy and a senior fellow and public advocate at the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society. Announcing her appointment, the White House noted that Sohn "would be the first openly LGBTIQ+ Commissioner in the history of the FCC."



Reporting by Anne Artley ('23), Alene Bouranova ('16), Marc Chalufour, Sara Rimer and Andrew Thurston

THANKS TO ALL OF YOU

This edition of *COM/365* is filled with stories that could not have happened without the generous support of so many people in the COM community. Invaluable internship experiences, vital research and vibrant storytelling are helping COM students and faculty make this world a better—and more enjoyable—place. They couldn't do it without your help.

Thank you.

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*"I AM grateful
 for all of
 the INSPIRING
 PEOPLE I have
 met in COM."*

*—ANIKA
 BRAHMBHATT
 (CAS'22, COM'22)*



WHY I GIVE



Although **Michelle Pujals ('88)** majored in print journalism at COM, she worked only briefly as a reporter before pivoting to law school. But she credits that journalism education with helping her career in litigation and sports law.

"The skills are very, very similar," says Pujals, who worked for more than two decades as an attorney for the National Basketball Association (NBA). "What I learned as a journalism major really helped me talk to people and get information from them to help me do my job. That's so important, because as an in-house lawyer, you're creating relationships that are going to exist for a long time. You want people to feel like you're listening to them and you're helping them."

Pujals was vice president and assistant general counsel when she left the NBA in 2018 to become a self-employed consultant. She donates to COM because she's grateful for the education BU provided. "It gave me a great base for learning how to be an adult and how to be a professional," she says. "I don't think I would have been as successful in law school and as a lawyer without that foundation."

Pujals also supports COM scholarships because she respects the challenges journalists face. She spent two summers as a newspaper and magazine reporter, so she knows the stress and pressure involved in producing balanced, informative coverage on tight deadlines. "The media is very important in our society," she says. "It's had some tough times, and I think it's important to support that mission."

—June D. Bell

WHY I GIVE



Chris Williams (CGS'91, COM'93) spent Thanksgiving morning wrangling a colossal Red Titan balloon as it bobbed in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Red Titan is the superhero alter ego of a child YouTube star named Ryan Kaji, and Williams' company, pocket.watch, is the studio that helped propel the Ryan's World franchise to internet fame and merchandising fortune.

Now, Williams is giving BU students a boost, too—particularly minorities preparing for careers in media and entertainment. Williams and his wife, Carrie, recently launched the Williams Family Fund for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. "A lot of people who want to work in media and entertainment are subsidized and have a huge advantage," Williams says. But many families cannot provide financial support as their students work in the unpaid internships that are critical for gaining experience and making industry connections. The fund, which will be administered by COM Dean Mariette DiChristina ('86), will cover student travel to conferences, DEI-related events and activities, career-related activities and a grant to cover summer internships.

Williams says he was motivated to help COM students because "I'm a big believer in the school and have a lot of loyalty to the communications program. They can reach a lot of students and do a lot of good."

A former executive at Yahoo, Disney and Maker Studios, Williams launched pocket.watch in 2017. The Hollywood-based studio is the force behind *Ryan's Mystery Playdate* on Nickelodeon and *Super Spy Ryan*, a hybrid live-action and animated show on Amazon Kids+.

Williams still uses the skills he sharpened as a broadcast and film major. "I learned a lot about storytelling, and at the heart of everything I do is telling a story—not just on the creative side, but on the business side," he says. "I'm constantly creating narratives that tell the story of our business." —*June D. Bell*

"I AM so thankful for COM's incredible resources—from its faculty and staff to alumni, I have been able to DEVELOP CONNECTIONS and expand my network."

—SHAYE SPECTOR ('22)



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