Media giant Condé Nast announces restructuring of music publication *Pitchfork*

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On January 17, multimedia conglomerate Condé Nast announced that *Pitchfork*, the well-recognized online music review and news publication, was being absorbed by *GQ*, the monthly men's fashion and style magazine.

The announcement came amid an ongoing jobs bloodbath in the US, including in the media and entertainment industries.

The Associated Press (AP) reported that 12 full-time *Pitchfork* staff, ten of whom were part of the site's editorial team, were being laid off immediately, leaving the site with only a permanent eight-person editorial team. More layoffs are expected.

The decision came after "a careful evaluation of *Pitchfork*'s performance," according to chief global content officer Anna Wintour, the notorious media executive and *Vogue* editor, in a statement that was leaked on social media. Other executives have issued statements meant to downplay the impact of the reshuffling, stressing the *Pitchfork* name would be retained.

"It is bleak on so many levels," asserted former *Pitchfork* writer Laura Snapes in the *Guardian*, "first and foremost the job losses during a strained time for media. *Pitchfork* was one of the last stable music outlets going—where else are the former staff, and the site's hundreds of freelancers, meant to work now?"

The AP obtained comments from Joanna Melissakis, the chief of sales and beauty at Condé Nast, who explained ominously that "*Pitchfork* will remain a standalone brand but the internal reporting structure is changing."

The absorption of *Pitchfork* by *GQ* came despite the fact that the music site had "by volume… the highest daily site visitors of any of our titles," explained a Condé Nast audience developer on Twitter/X. The website's "higher consuming segments generate more unique page views by volume than any title. This despite scant resourcing, esp. from corporate."

The publication, founded by US blog writer Ryan Schreiber in 1996, evolved from a site focused on independent music, leaving its mark with long form and at times scathing daily reviews, into a dominant music media taste-maker.

By the time the publication was acquired by Condé Nast (with 2022 revenue of $1.7 billion) nine years ago, it had expanded its staff considerably and opened its pages to discuss a wider swath of popular music.

Numerous commentators and artists have noted the impact a positive album review in *Pitchfork* could have on an artist's career. "There was a period of time where if *Pitchfork* said something was good, I thought it was good. And if they panned something, I probably wouldn't bother listening to it," Gareth Paisey of the indie band Los Campesinos! (from Cardiff, Wales) told the AP.

Paisey pointed to the obvious fact that independent artists such as himself would likely lose out as the result of *Pitchfork*'s restructuring. "This sounds trite, but Taylor Swift isn't tweeting her disappointment that *Pitchfork* is closing, right?… It's the independent, experimental artists that are going to suffer."

The end of *Pitchfork*'s independent existence speaks to the ever-increasing domination of popular music by a few conglomerates. As *Wired* noted in 2021, "Three major record labels produce two-thirds of all music consumed in America. They are the most powerful buyer of music and talent, and they use that power to prioritize a handful of mega-stars and pop hits. They pitch music into massive radio conglomerates and streaming platforms that control how music is consumed, and they collect an ever-growing share of industry revenue." Meanwhile, the overwhelming majority of musicians struggle to keep their heads above water, most of them obliged to work other jobs to make ends meet.

At the same time, the downsizing at *Pitchfork* is part of a general crisis within the US media. *Forbes* reported in December that the "media industry was beset with a series of layoffs impacting a number of sectors in 2023." Challenger Gray and Christmas, a firm that tracks employment figures, estimated that more than 20,000 media jobs in the US were eliminated last year, the largest number since 2020 and the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In November, Vice Media, the American-Canadian digital media and broadcasting company, announced it was cutting positions and ending several news programs. This announcement was only the latest along similar lines, following the company's decision to file for bankruptcy in May last year.

Vice co-executives Bruce Dixon and Hozefa Lokhandwala, in words similar to those now used by Condé Nast representatives, released a public statement reassuring the public that "To be clear, Vice News is not going away."

Last Friday, *Sports Illustrated* magazine's parent company issued a memo declaring it would be "laying off staff that work on the SI brand," which the staff union told CNN would mean "probably all" of its members. Various media outlets suggested the move might well prove the "death knell" for the once popular magazine, first published in 1954.

Washington Post writers struck for a day in December against planned layoffs and low pay.

The union at the *Los Angeles Times* revealed last week that the newspaper was preparing "significant" job cuts, affecting "at least" 100 journalists, or about 20 percent of the newsroom.

Ezra Klein in the *New York Times* noted on January 21 that more than "350 newspapers failed in the first few years of the pandemic. That was the same pace at which newspapers were failing *before* the pandemic: a rate of two closures or so per week."

"Overall, 2,500 newspapers in the United States—a quarter of them—have closed since 2005. The country is set up to lose one-third of its newspapers by 2025," Klein added. This has led to the creation of "so-called news deserts—places with limited access to local news." The article pointed out that nearly 20 percent of the US populace now lives in such a "desert."