

THE DAILY GAMBLE: A NEVER-ENDING WAR BETWEEN TRUTH AND TABLOID

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By Joseph Bologna

Founded in 1897, The Daily Bugle remains one of New York City's longest-standing news publications still in service today. Such an outlet does not remain in print for the better part of two centuries without adapting to the times, and the Flatiron Building's most famous tenant hasn't been without its fair share of tribulations over the years. While the Bugle would rise to prominence with hard-cutting exposés on Nixon-era corruption, the outlet has found itself struggling to keep up with the social media era amid management's hyper-fixation on a certain topic of the **web-headed** variety. Once the six cent street corner paper on which "passers-by would come to rely," the now multi-platform news provider finds itself at a turning point as its existence comes even further into question at the height of a digital age and a changing of the guard.

The Daily Bugle first came to be a respected publication in the early 1970s as then-reporter J. Jonah Jameson took on the Maggia, a super-powered sub-sect of the New York mafia, when few other newspapers would dare to invite their wrath. Until then, the Bugle had mostly been known for featuring the first political cartoon depicting Steve Rogers as **Captain America on the frontlines** in March 1941. Otherwise, what is now one of the Big Apple's most popular publications would spend much of its early years struggling to keep up with competitors. Even its sports column would remain largely overlooked until reporter Wendy Thorton would shake up coverage in the late 90s. Many have heralded Jameson's work uncovering and exposing corruption among the New York elite as a turning point for the paper, so it is no surprise that he would soon thereafter find himself on the path to becoming publisher within the following decades.

"You have to have skin in the game," Jameson would say in a **1980 interview** upon taking the helm of the newspaper he pushed firmly into the public eye nearly twenty years prior. JJJ, or "Triple J," as he came to be known by his cohorts, was no stranger to placing his hide on the line for his work. Years of challenging a seemingly untouchable criminal enterprise did not go unanswered for. Many public threats were levied Jameson's way over the course of his time as a reporter in attempts to silence him, some of which he even **directly addressed** in his writings. When those didn't work, however, the Maggia resorted to making efforts on his life. One such instance saw Manfredi Family enforcer Joseph Martello, known in the criminal underworld as "Hammerhead," attempt a public execution on the Bugle publisher while he was out to dinner with friend and frequent in-house collaborator, current Daily Bugle Editor-in-Chief Joseph "Robbie" Robertson. When the assassination was thwarted by the NYPD and an unidentified interloper, Jameson would claim that "the real crime that night was that I didn't get to order dessert."

Jameson's sharp tongue, and seemingly chronic penchant for using it, would often bring him into contention with competitors and constituents alike. Long-time Daily Bugle secretary Betty Brant cited a temper and "short fuse" as the former Editor-In-Chief's primary shortcomings. These crutches would often times impact the day-to-day proceedings in Jameson's newsroom. While reports of thrown chairs and a dartboard affixed with a photograph of rival publication The Daily Globe's Editor-In-Chief remain unsubstantiated, several Bugle employees have since come forward with troubling accounts of their time in "The House That Jameson Built." Frequent freelance photographer Peter Parker claims to have been personally fired by the publisher "at least twice a week, sometimes even in the same meeting."

A glossary look back at J. Jonah Jameson's body of work and achievements paints a more complicated image of the news titan, however. Jameson spent his earliest days at the Bugle **championing the Civil Rights Movement** and doubled his efforts as he became Editor-In-Chief. When Jameson outright bought the publication in the summer of 1992, many saw it as a power play by an egotistical control freak. **Recent findings**, however, indicate that Jameson may have done so due, in large part, to contention with then-owner George Dunn over repeated attempts to minimize minority voices within the company. **One report** even suggests that Dunn pressured Jameson to oust Robertson, the Bugle's highest-ranking black employee, which was allegedly the final straw.

The apparent strength of Jameson's character, as well as his accomplishments in his time with the Bugle, now primarily stand in grim contrast with the legacy the former publisher and Editor-In-Chief leaves behind. Earlier this year, Jameson announced via **Twitter post** that he would be stepping down from his roles at The Daily Bugle. While sudden and free of the typical scandals these types of announcements tend to precede, the writing for this post had long been on the metaphorical wall well before he sent it out to his 7.5k followers. Jameson's personal demons had haunted his offices since before the lease was in his name. Well into his storied career, Jameson suffered tragedy in the murder of his wife, Joan; An experience which those close to J. Jonah claim marked his shift into a more compulsive journalist. While many assumed Joan Jameson's murder to be Maggia retaliation against their most vocal enemy, a theory perpetuated in contemporary true crime assessments, Jameson was never convinced and dedicated years of personal and professional investigation to finding answers. Closure would never come for Jameson, however, as his wife's murder remains unsolved to this day.

While Jameson would largely recover from the loss of Joan, even remarrying in 2002, many of those wounds remain unhealed. His "obsession," as Jameson's son, John, would call it in a **2007 interview** regarding his Oscorp-led mission to the moon, would continuously cause rifts in the Editor-In-Chief's personal and professional lives. Arguably no one was more affected by Jameson's self-destructive tendencies than his most trusted industry ally, Joseph Robertson, who would briefly step away from the Bugle in 1990. "I just couldn't watch him do that to himself anymore," Robertson tells us years after the fact. While the two would reconcile, and Robertson would rejoin the

Bugle just before Jameson's purchase of the company, the two would continue finding themselves in disagreement with the paper's focus and direction.

The early 2000s brought about an unprecedented breadth of massive societal change. The essence of publication and communication would see upheaval with the rise of social media, and the very nature of existence would alter dramatically in the seemingly sudden rise of global super/metahuman populations. The "Super Boom," as it would come to be colloquially coined, marked a seismic shift in the acknowledgement/revelation of super-powered individuals, mutant or otherwise, among the worldwide populace. Seated squarely in the middle of these ethical turning points were J. Jonah Jameson and The Daily Bugle. An aforementioned vocal supporter of the Civil Rights movement of the late 20th century, Jameson has **recently fallen under more scrutiny** for failing to live up to the moment as anti-mutant rhetoric found a foothold around the time he came into ownership of the publication.

While never a voice against mutantkind, The Daily Bugle spent years dancing around the topic before taking a more vocal stand against rising "Human First" sentiments growing in the United States. This was not the only topic the Jameson-led Bugle would arrive late to, however. The rise in social media saw a parallel fall in print newspapers, and The Daily Bugle trailed behind many of its contemporaries in going digital. Jameson, ironically conservative when it came to technological advances, initially brushed off such apps as "fads" which would fizzle out as quickly as they arrived. A prediction that far off the mark has sunk several newspapers across the country, so Jameson was inordinately lucky to catch a paper-printing phenomenon in his **web**.

Among New York's plethora of brightly-colored do-gooders, none have captured the hearts and minds (and purse-snatchers) of the Big Apple quite like Spider-Man. After an admittedly **rocky start** to his super-heroing days, 'Spidey,' as his adoring fans would label him, quickly came into his own as one of the city's most beloved icons. With great notoriety came great media coverage, and no other outlet was more enamored with the web-slinger than J. Jonah Jameson's. While Spider-Man was mostly celebrated in the news, at least when he wasn't **being framed for crimes perpetrated by failed special effects artists**, Jameson held a much different opinion of the hero and allowed his personal bias dictate the Bugle's coverage. As he has been sure to remind readers ad-nauseam over the years, Jameson harbors a deep-rooted hatred for Spider-Man, even dubbing him a "menace" every chance he gets. In attempts to justify himself, J. Jonah has cited the unidentified hero's use of a mask to hide his identity and "flippant disregard for the rule of law." In hindsight, many have connected Jameson's obsession with Spider-Man, and specifically his reliance on anonymity, with the loss of his first wife to an armed assailant who also obscured his face with a mask.

While once again butting heads on the matter with Robertson, who was a vocal supporter of Spider-Man even before the webhead **saved his son's life**, JJJ would find unwonted success in his newest target. For reasons that remain unclear, and in spite of the Bugle remaining Spider-Man's loudest and most incessant critic, Jameson's publication remained the exclusive source for fresh photos of the web-slinger for the

remainder of his time as publisher and Editor-In-Chief. When asked, frequent Spidey photographer Peter Parker only replied “I don’t know, maybe he’s a bit of a masochist.” Many would attribute the Bugle’s skyrocketing sales amid print’s otherwise guaranteed demise to Parker’s exclusive work capturing the high-flying figure despite Jameson’s overly-negative depiction of the hero. While Jameson’s mandated focus on Spider-Man would save the Bugle from falling to the wayside during social media’s supplanting of traditional news, the Editor-In-Chief’s vitriol would soon steer the paper into more troubling waters.

Alongside the rise of hateful rhetoric, conspiracy theories, and “hate-clicks,” The Daily Bugle’s overwhelmingly negative coverage of an otherwise unanimously exalted hero attracted a certain demographic of readers. Jameson’s publication would often find itself cited among ill-intended Tweets and podcasts, his own words even being attributed to the creation of a mercenary-turned man-trapped-in-scorpion-armor. A point of no return presented itself in the use of a Bugle article during a campaign speech by **anti-mutant extremist group sympathizer**, Florida Senator Arthur Kane. This moment marked a shift in the Bugle staff’s complacency toward Jameson’s work after many spent years attempting to dissuade/redirect the publisher’s focus. While Jameson himself would speak out against the Senator in a **rare front-page op-ed**, and promises of course-correction were made, the damage had already been done. What was once a lauded publication, which played a major role in taking down one of the most dangerous crime syndicates the United States had ever seen, had become a commercialized tabloid bordering on self-parody. In order to survive, The Daily Bugle had to undergo surgery the likes of which only Stephen Strange would be capable of successfully performing.

Enter: **The Tweet**. Thanking his team for their work and dedication, as well as plugging his upcoming podcast, J. Jonah Jameson relinquished himself of his roles as publisher and Editor-In-Chief, leaving them in the capable hands of his friend, confidant, and frequent conscience-checker Joseph “Robbie” Robertson. A Harlem native, but “short-time Philadelphian” as he would joke, Robertson brings an impressive body of work into his new leading roles. Much like his predecessor, Robertson is no stranger to the inherent dangers of his profession. The current Editor-In-Chief came afoul of all sorts of unsavory types during his early years as a Bugle reporter. Robertson would lead the **exposé** which led to the identification and incarceration of gangster Lonnie Lincoln, better known in headlines as “Tombstone,” whom Robertson first encountered while they attended the same high school. “I could never stand bullies,” Robertson told me while we sat in The Coffee Bean, just a few blocks from the Bugle offices. “I spent a lot of time regretting how I let that man, that boy at the time, bully me into silence.” Reflecting on a time he discovered Lincoln was extorting other students for money but was unable to stop him, Robertson called it a “life-altering” moment. “I knew then and there that I wanted to be a reporter. If I couldn’t beat bullies with my fists, I’d make sure people knew exactly what they were in words. I never backed down from a fight again.”

While certainly battle-hardened by his over two-decades-long career, Robertson may only now be weighing in for the fight of his life. The Daily Bugle’s first black publisher and Editor-In-Chief is inheriting a house of cards built upon unstable bedrock at a time

in which journalistic integrity remains under constant attack. Much of the Bugle's less vitriolic readers have long-abandoned the paper, and the publication's latest forays into social media and digital streaming have struggled to keep pace with larger outlets in recent years. "The unprecedented nature of our circumstance is not lost on me," Robertson claims. The incumbent publisher's tenure as the Bugle's primary course-corrector has gone largely uncelebrated in spite of the fledgling paper's unlikely survival. Several Bugle staffers substantiate that Robertson himself was responsible for "balancing out" Jameson's rhetoric. Associate Editor Mary Jane Watson affirmed as such, saying that "for every Spider-Man hit-piece, Robbie was sure to make page space for community spotlights and positive stories." Watson was hired by Robertson toward the tail-end of JJJ's tenure and celebrates her new boss' appointing. "Robbie is everything that the Bugle should be," she adds. "He's driven by the facts, not fame or sales figures. It's refreshing."

Sales figures must be a frequent topic among the reshuffled managerial team, however, as it finds itself in need of more readers. "We need to rebuild our audience, but also our audience's trust in us." The Bugle's new head-honcho is certainly more prescient than his predecessor in regard to maintaining a digital presence. Rumor has it he himself was responsible for paper's eventual step onto social media by leaving Twitter open on Jameson's desktop for him to "discover" on his own. He would not substantiate this claim. Savvy as he may be, Robertson has risen to the helm of a newspaper company at a harsh time for news reporting. An industry that was, at one point, upheld as an unwavering voice of the people now takes frequent hits from sitting presidents and entire political parties. While the high ground has never been easy to follow, the trek has been made all the more difficult by the modern age's financial toll. "Hate sells," Robertson admonishes, certainly being no stranger to the effects of bigotry on a national stage himself. "Our papers sold with Spider-Man on the cover and then kept selling when certain people agreed with what we were saying about him. I struggled with that a lot," he added. "We as journalists are forced to ask ourselves every day 'Am I willing to lose money, maybe lose my job, to keep my morals?' Not many people still in this field can answer that question these days, but it seems pretty easy to me."

When asked why he stayed with a paper he felt at odds with the direction of, Robertson said it was a sense of duty that kept him in place. "To the paper, to Jonah. I'd hoped he would have gotten over it. Honestly felt like I got through to him a few times, but it wasn't happening." Robertson says that experience affirmed the direction he hopes to take the Bugle in under his leadership. "We cannot try to appease certain audiences. Our job is to provide the facts to those who need them." The new Editor-In-Chief's focus on fact over fluff is a promising starting point and, while the future of The Daily Bugle is an uncertain one, it does seem brighter under Joseph Robertson's direction.

"Now more than ever, it is tantamount that we stand for journalistic integrity at a time in which it is under attack by bad actors just as often as our power plants are by grown men in animal costumes."