slate's 10th anniversary

A Slate Timeline
Ten years of the magazine's history in 10 minutes.
By David Plotz
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1996

It was originally going to be called Boot, in tribute to the protagonist of Evelyn Waugh's novel Scoop. Then someone informed Michael Kinsley that "boot" was slang for "vomit." So Kinsley picked Slate instead. In our inaugural issue, June 24, 1996, he wrote that the name "means nothing, or practically nothing. We chose it as an empty vessel into which we can pour meaning. We hope Slate will come to mean good original journalism in this new medium. Beyond that, who knows?"

The magazine, as we all insisted on calling it, was a fortunate product of Kinsley's curiosity, Microsoft's money, and the emerging infatuation with the Internet. Tired of playing the liberal on Crossfire and of working for unprofitable journals beholden to whimsical benefactors, Kinsley approached college acquaintance Steve Ballmer in the summer of 1995 and suggested that Microsoft publish a Webzine. An online magazine, liberated from the production and mailing costs that squeezed general-interest print titles, might actually become profitable. Ballmer and Bill Gates, newly enthralled with the Internet, quickly signed up Kinsley. On Christmas Day, 1995, he moved to Seattle (occasioning a Newsweek cover for which he posed in a rain slicker, holding a salmon) and set up shop on the Microsoft campus.

When Slate launched six months later, it was both radical and conservative. Slate intended to be skeptical about its new medium, Kinsley declared in his opening essay: "We do not start out with the smug assumption that the Internet changes the nature of human thought, or that all the restraints that society imposes on individuals in 'real life' must melt away in cyberia. There is a deadening conformity in the hipness of cyberspace culture in which we don't intend to participate. Part of our mission at Slate will be trying to bring cyberspace down to earth."
The early Slate was indeed earthbound. At first, Slate was essentially a weekly print magazine that happened to be published on the Web—more like a New Republic without the lead time than a revolution. Most articles were posted on Friday, and the site was not regularly updated during the week. (The first “issues” even had page numbers.) But we took baby steps toward Web-iness with e-mail debates and computer art exhibits. Perhaps the most important editorial accomplishment of our first six months was "The Slate 60," a roster of the year’s most generous charitable donors. The ranking would become an annual tradition.

By year’s end, Slate was attracting 15,000 readers a day. We had offices in Seattle, New York (home base for culture editor Judith Shulevitz and political correspondent Jacob Weisberg), and Washington (a tiny bureau run by Jodie Allen). Slate lost money, of course—our only revenues were a tiny trickle from early banner ads. One creative business scheme went memorably awry. Our first publisher struck a deal with a burgeoning coffee chain called Starbucks to sell copies of a monthly Slate compendium in its outlets around the country. It was a disaster. Store managers had no idea what to do with the magazines, which mostly piled up in their storerooms under boxes of Amaretto syrup. So much for Seattle synergy.

1997

We began the year by chickening out. Our plan had been to start charging for subscriptions to Slate in January. But our payment software was buggy, which gave us the excuse we were looking for to postpone the day of reckoning.

More notable was that Slate began to act less like a print magazine and more like a Web site. One prod for this was the death of Princess Diana in August. When the news broke, Web traffic spiked to record levels, and our competitors (notably Salon) crammed their sites with news stories, speculation, memorials, poems—anything to capture browsers. Slate chose not to interrupt one of its summer “skip weeks”—a tradition inherited from print magazines in which publications shut down and everyone goes to the beach. Diana’s death finally made us understand that online journalism is by nature a round-the-clock business. Our publishing pace began to pick up—from weekly to daily to several times a day.

Another mark of our accelerating pace was the launch of "Today’s Papers," an early morning summary of the five national newspapers. Scott Shuger stayed up every night reading the papers on the Web, then posted the column by 6 a.m. and e-mailed it to tens of thousands of subscribers. (Matt Drudge, then an obscure Internet junkie, had been our first choice to write “Today’s Papers,” but he turned us down and suggested Scott.) Other beginnings: Herb Stein, our 80-year-old economics columnist—and the most rational man you could hope to meet—started writing an agony column called “Dear Prudence.” Atul Gawande inaugurated the “Medical Examiner” column; James Surowiecki signed on as our first business writer; and Michael Lewis moved to Silicon Valley and started covering Internet-boom culture for us in a column called “Millioners.”

1998

Slate’s brief, unfortunate period as a paid magazine began in February. We figured that readers accustomed to subscribing to paper magazines would readily fork over $19.95 for a year of Slate (and the premium of a Seattle-suitable Slate umbrella). Michael Kinsley gamely tried to persuade readers that paying for Slate was the right, even patriotic, thing to do: "One of Slate’s main goals is to demonstrate, if we can, that the economics of cyberspace make it easier for our kind of journalism to pay for itself. Most magazines like Slate depend on someone’s generosity or vanity or misplaced optimism to pay the bills. But self-supporting journalism is freer journalism,” Kinsley wrote in his “Readme” column. "If the Web can make serious journalism more easily self-supporting, that is a great gift from technology to democracy.”

Given how early we were in the development of the medium, signing up more than 20,000 subscribers was hardly a defeat. But do the math—it barely covered our latte bills. And authors who had been reaching a growing and enthusiastic audience suddenly found themselves performing for a tiny circle of readers. Many of us bit our tongues—or didn’t—while waiting for the experiment to be pronounced a failure.

The other excitement was the Monica Lewinsky scandal—nicknamed "Flytrap" by Slate. Timothy Noah inherited "Chatterbox," a funny,
idiosyncratic political column. Several authors collaborated to produce a serialized e-mail novel. Titled Reply All, it was very ambitious, and somewhat less successful. We launched “The Explainer,” which became our most popular regular column. And we tweaked the corporate masters with daily coverage of the Microsoft antitrust trial. The dispatches gleefully mocked the stumbling lawyers and implausible executives sent to defend the company. (This tweaking did not seem to bother the big boss: Bill Gates wrote a weeklong “Diary” for us that spring.)

1999

Our experiment as a paid site ended abjectly on Valentine’s Day, less than a year after it had begun. Wry political analysis, it turned out, was different from porn. A few would pay for it, but not enough to cover our costs. Slate’s new publisher, Scott Moore, brought us a new business plan: No subscriptions = more readers. More readers = more advertisers. More advertisers = more revenue.

One of our signal achievements of 1999 wasn’t recognized at the time. Slate started running Mickey Kaus’ musings and linkings under the rubric “Kausfiles.” There was as yet no name for what Mickey was writing—a casual, first-person, frequently updated, obsessive, link-heavy journal. Only several years later was it recognized that Mickey had been writing what was probably the first political blog. Our favorite Canadian arrived, too: Dahlia Lithwick began covering the Supreme Court, and her hilarious, eagle-eyed dispatches soon became required reading for every lawyer in Washington—and many elsewhere around the country.

Regular contributor Herb Stein died in September. And in what would become a regular pattern, the New York Times started poaching Slate writers. Paul Krugman was the first to go, lured away with an op-ed column. The Times soon nabbed Virginia Heffernan, Judith Shulevitz, and Jodi Kantor as well.

2000

The year began with a pointless, mean-spirited, and highly enjoyable spat with Salon, which had made a public stock offering and dramatically expanded its staff. Slate’s rather different response to the Internet bubble involved hunkering down and controlling costs. The competition culminated with Michael Kinsley and Salon editor David Talbot slinging insults at each other. Talbot charged that Kinsley was “not the sexiest guy in the world.” Kinsley responded by gleefully dissecting Salon’s dismal balance sheet. Slate’s traffic surged around our 2000 election coverage. We also made news by flouting two silly election-year conventions. During presidential primaries, we posted leaked exit-poll results that other publications were withholding until they were prepared to declare a winner. And just before Election Day, more than 40 Slate staffers disclosed who they were voting for and why. (Gore trounced Bush at Slate, for all the good it did him.) The eventual winner gave Slate a great present. Jacob Weisberg began tracking George W. Bush’s malapropisms and publishing them as “Bushisms,” which also became a series of popular books.

2001

Slate produced some of its smartest, and most moving, work in the days and months after the Sept. 11 attacks. Navy veteran Scott Shuger left “Today’s Papers” to cover the war on terror full-time and handed off the feature to its current writer, Eric Umansky.

The year had its goofier side, too. As The Sopranos exploded as a cultural phenomenon, we enlisted psychiatrists and therapists to conduct a weekly dialogue about the show and Tony Sopranos’s therapy. Virginia Heffernan became our first regular TV critic. David Plotz’s “Seed” project, an investigation into the mysterious Nobel Prize sperm bank, played with a new kind of Internet journalism—open-source, collaborative reporting. By using readers as his sources, Plotz dug out the buried history of this strange eugenic experiment in a series of stories that would lead to his 2005 book, The Genius Factory.

2002

A year of upheaval at Slate. Michael Kinsley announced he was stepping down as Slate’s editor, though he would stay on as a
A timeline of Slate's first 10 years. By David Plotz

weekly columnist. In April, chief political correspondent Jacob Weisberg succeeded Mike and shifted the base of Slate's operations from Seattle to New York. Christopher Hitchens, fresh from quitting The Nation over political differences, began writing a weekly column titled "Fighting Words." In June, Scott Shuger died in a scuba-diving accident at age 50. Fred Kaplan, who had just left the Boston Globe, took over the military-affairs column Scott had been writing, "War Stories." Jack Shafer began writing "Press Box" regularly. William Saletan became chief political correspondent. Daniel Gross took over the "Moneybox" column. Meghan O'Rourke, a recent arrival from The New Yorker, succeeded Jodi Kantor as Slate's culture editor. On the business side, publisher Scott Moore got kicked upstairs to a high-powered executive job, and Cyrus Krohn—who had been Kinsley's first Slate hire back in 1995—replaced him.

2003

We joined forces with two media powerhouses in 2003. In May, Slate began distributing Garry Trudeau's Doonesbury strip on the Web, along with Doonesbury's archives, special polls, and contests. In the summer, Slate and National Public Radio began producing Day to Day, an hour-long midday news magazine. Day to Day became the fastest-growing show in NPR's history, airing on more than 100 stations by year's end. Seth Stevenson took over the "Ad Report Card" column from Rob Walker. Emily Yoffe began writing her hilarious, masochistic "Human Guinea Pig" column. We won the National Magazine Award for General Excellence Online, the first time a Web-only publication had nabbed the prize.

2004

We started considering an exit strategy from Microsoft. Though Microsoft had always supported Slate and respected its editorial independence, we were finding it hard to develop the business side of the magazine. Microsoft, which at one point in the late '90s was publishing several dozen content sites, had shut them all down except Slate and its MSNBC joint venture, and we began to feel we would be better off at a media company. So, in the middle of the year, Editor Jacob Weisberg and Microsoft executives began exploring the possibility of selling Slate. The Washington Post Company emerged as the most suitable buyer, and in the fall, Microsoft struck a deal to sell Slate to the Post.

In the meantime, we were busy with the presidential election. Our "Swingers" series took Slate reporters to every tossup state in the campaign. The "Election Scorecard," William Saletan's tool to analyze state polls, proved one of our most popular features ever, as readers frantically crunched and recrunched the data to see whether Bush or Kerry had the edge. And Henry Blodget returned from his Internet-era notoriety to cover the Martha Stewart trial for us.

2005-2006

The sale to the Washington Post Company went through in January, making us a sister publication to the Washington Post newspaper and Newsweek magazine. Slate closed its Seattle office and settled almost the entire staff in New York and Washington. Cliff Sloan, vice president of business affairs and general counsel for Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive, became our new publisher. Michael Kinsley, who had left briefly to run the Los Angeles Times opinion section, returned as a columnist. Our multimedia efforts grew. We started publishing the best newspaper political cartoons—a portfolio that now features 14 Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonists. In December, Slate and Magnum Photos began collaborating on "Today's Pictures," a daily slide show of photographs from Magnum's extraordinary archives. Witold Rybczynski signed on as our architecture critic.

Technological innovation, once a weakness, was becoming a strong point. Slate was one of the first major media outlets to begin podcasting, and our podcast is consistently one of iTunes' most popular. We launched our first regular video feature, Robert Wright's "Meaning of Life TV." In early 2006, Walter Kim began writing his acclaimed online novel, The Unbinding, as a Slate serial.

What happened in a decade? When we began in 1996, we published once a week. By the beginning of 2006, we were publishing 20 times a day and putting up as many stories in 24 hours as we used to post in a week. In 1996, Slate was lucky to get 10,000 readers a day. In 2006, we often have 1 million readers a day. Slate's childhood is over. We're looking forward to an unruly adolescence.

This article is adapted from the introduction to
The Best of Slate: A 10th Anniversary Anthology. Click here to buy the book.

*Correction, June 19, 2006: The timeline originally said that Witold Rybczynski was our first architecture critic. In fact, Christopher Hawthorne was Slate's architecture critic from 2002-2004. Click here to return to the corrected sentence.

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Illustrations by Robert Neubecker and Mark Alan Stamaty, respectively.

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