In August 1995, I made a secret trip to Seattle to talk with Microsoft about starting an online magazine (whatever that might be). On the plane back home to Washington, D.C., I found myself sitting next to Christopher Buckley, the comic novelist. Like an idiot, I immediately asked him, "Why were you in Seattle?" He said he had been giving a speech, and, like a gentleman, naturally asked me the same question. To which I was forced to reply, like a parody of the Washington self-importance in Chris' novels, "I can't tell you. It's a secret." When the secret came out a few weeks later, Chris sent me a note: "I figured it wasn't Boeing."

It wasn't Boeing. But Microsoft's suburban corporate campus was still an odd place to be practicing journalism. My interest in the project and Microsoft's interest were very different, but a good fit. Like many magazine editors, and journalists generally, I dreamed of starting a magazine of my own. And I had discovered that the magic words "on" and "line" were a way to interest others in this solipsistic proposition. Microsoft, meanwhile, had no particular interest in starting a magazine. But, like many companies in those early days, it was flinging anything it could find at the Internet to see what might stick. After two decades in Washington, I moved to Seattle on Christmas Day, 1995. (I'm still here, and married to one of the Microsoft executives I met that day in August. But that's another story.) I had an office cube in a long hall (otherwise populated by software developers), a computer, and a memo I had written about what this online magazine might be like. Almost everything in the memo was completely wrong. Fortunately, I soon had colleagues who took pleasure in telling me so.

*Slate* began publishing in June 1996 with a small staff based primarily on the Microsoft campus in Redmond, Wash., plus even smaller offices in Washington and New York. In Washington, we sublet space from the American Enterprise Institute. The rent included feeding privileges in the conservative think tank's almost-lavish dining room, where young *Slate*sters could chow down with eminences of the right like Robert Bork, Jeane Kirkpatrick, and Irving Kristol. On the other hand, those of us in Redmond enjoyed the splendors of the Microsoft cafeteria, with its legendary free soft drinks. So, that was a wash.

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Soon, though, we were truly publishing in cyberspace. A typical staff meeting might include three or four people in Redmond, two or three each in Washington and New York, foreign-affairs columnist Anne Applebaum on the phone from Warsaw, the late Scott Shuger (original author of Slate's "Today's Papers") from Los Angeles or one year (when his wife had a fellowship there) from Berlin, copy editor Sian Gibby from Cincinnati, me (late as usual) from the Microsoft parking garage, and so on. These various locations weren't just branches of the Redmond HQ. It was a single operation in which geography was irrelevant. Of the four original top editors, Jodie Allen was in Washington, Judith Shulevitz was in New York, and Jack Shafer and I were in Redmond, but it made no difference since 99 percent of our communication was via e-mail. When Jack moved back to Washington, it was hardly noticeable. This all seemed more remarkable at the time than it does now.

But one measure of Slate's success is that being online is no longer central to its definition. Slate is now part of the journalistic establishment. When quoted or referred to in the media, it is no longer "Slate, the experiment in online journalism that Bill Gates is bankrolling for Mike Kinsley, who used to be somebody on television," or "Slate, the online magazine published by Microsoft," or even "Slate, the online magazine." It's just Slate. Like Time or Newsweek. In 2002, Jacob Weisberg took over from me as the editor. In 2005, Microsoft sold Slate to the Washington Post Co., and it now operates out of more traditional journalistic surroundings in Washington and New York.

Please forgive a short victory lap. Slate was one of several on- and off-line publications launched with a lot of hype and a lot of money in the past decade. Most of the others (Talk, Brill's Content, Current) are dead. Where is the analyst at a firm called Forrester Research who used to be quoted everywhere calling us, witlessly, "the Slatanic"? Haven't heard much from him lately. And while it's certainly true that Microsoft was a generous, tolerant, patient, and hands-off backer during Slate's early years, it is not true that "Bill Gates' deep pockets" are the only reason Slate is still around while these others are not. If we had spent money the way some of these other publications did during the late '90s Internet bubble, Microsoft would have shut us down long ago. If these projects had guarded their pennies the way we did, they would still be publishing.

From the beginning, our test of success was financial: We wanted to break even. And there have been quarters during the past two or three years when Slate has indeed broken even or nosed slightly into the black, though to be honest this is not yet a regular habit. But why is breaking even so important? Obviously Slate was a flyspeck on Microsoft's balance sheet and looms only slightly larger on the Washington Post Co.'s. What difference does a few million dollars of profit or loss matter while billions course around us? It makes a big difference. For a publication, like an individual, financial independence brings intellectual independence. The technical term for this, I believe, is "fuckyouability" (FUA). If you're self-supporting, you can say "fuck you" to anyone, which is one important function of a magazine on almost any subject and in any medium.

The theory that Slate set out to prove was that the Internet made FUA more widely available. From the beginning, the economics of publishing on the Internet—no paper, no printing, no postage—were more important to us than the hyperlinks and the multimedia. In a way, though, we got this point wrong. Slate is sleek compared with equivalent paper magazines, but we are a galumphing contraption compared with blogs and wikis and instant messaging and other Internet innovations. Individuals with no corporate backing have
done more than Slate has done to upturn A.J. Liebling's famous dictum "Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one." On the other hand, Slate has gone far beyond anything I contemplated at the beginning in creative use of the new medium (what I tended, foolishly, to dismiss as "bells and whistles"). My original idea, believe it or not, was a publication that you would download and print out once a week. It would have been an inferior version of a print magazine—a bunch of pages stapled together (if you had a stapler nearby).

By the time Slate was launched, we had moved beyond that primitive once-a-week notion. I remember, with some embarrassment, the eureka moment when it dawned on me that an online magazine doesn't have to publish an entire issue at once. Pretty soon, I even figured out that you didn't need to have "issues" at all. Nevertheless, when we launched, Slate—probably at my insistence—had page numbers, so that people could flip through it page-by-page or use a traditional table of contents. In my defense, even 10 years later there is no consensus about the best way to guide a reader through a Web site. Print has conventions—like page numbers—so ingrained that we don't even think about them. The Web doesn't.

Of the many things I got wrong at the beginning, the most notoriously wrong was my insistence that readers should have to pay for the privilege. I thought that was a test of seriousness, as well as an economic necessity. We launched as a free site, but down the road there was a period of about a year when we demanded $19.95 for an annual subscription. It wasn't a dismal failure: At the end of the year, we had more than 20,000 paid subscribers—a third of what the New Republic (my former employer) had after 75 years. But meanwhile our "front porch" (the free part) was attracting 20 times that number (different individuals who visited the site once or more a month). (Now that figure is more like 5 million.)

And subscribers don't really pay for print magazines: Even very successful glossy magazines often don't get enough from subscribers to cover the cost of finding them (through junk mail) and signing them up. The reason they bother to extract money from people is to persuade advertisers that these people really want the magazine and therefore are likely to actually read it. On the Web, you don't have to do that indirectly: You know exactly how many people have clicked their way onto a page. That makes the whole system of soliciting and charging subscribers unnecessary. There will probably be a small role for subscriber-paid journalism on the Web, but not a large one. And Slate is unlikely to be at the head of the pack. Been there, done that.

The magazine I dreamed of starting was a newsmagazine. On paper, on the Web, painted on the walls of caves—I didn't care. My theory was that Time and Newsweek had basically abandoned their mission. They responded to every crisis of identity for the past half-century in exactly the wrong way. From television to the Internet, the newsmags always assumed that new developments were making their central function of intelligently summarizing the news obsolete. So, for half a century or more they have been in retreat from that true function into features, consumerism, photographs, investigative reporting, health, sex—anything but telling and trying to explain what is going on in the world at the moment.

In fact (or so I theorize), the explosion of information, analysis, and opinion between 1950 and today makes a smart summarizing function more necessary, not less so. And that is what I thought Slate could provide, occupying the ground abandoned by its betters. Happily, the Web is made for this kind of thing. With links backward to the original story, or forward to a report due out next Tuesday, easy-to-use charts and graphs and photos, etc., the Web could perform "intelligent synthesis" on the world and the news a lot better than the traditional newsmagazines could. Or that was my theory. For 10 years, Slate has tried to do that and—especially under the current editor, Jacob Weisberg—a lot more.

Has Slate succeeded? Recently I was out of town and out of touch for about a week. Coming home, I read Time and Newsweek on the plane, then spent about 45 minutes with Slate when I got to a computer. So, which would I pick if I had to choose just one to bring me up to speed? Although I've had nothing to do with Slate's management now for almost half its existence, I suppose my objectivity may still be suspect. I say only that the answer made me very, very happy.

This article is adapted from the introduction to
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Michael Kinsley is Slate's founding editor. Illustration by Nina Frenkel.

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