How can journalism make a difference? That's the question that has been driving us at Mother Jones, every day, since our founding 45 years ago. It's our job to have an impact—by finding the truth about things that would otherwise stay hidden and getting it out to people who make change.

But impact isn’t always what you think. Yes, it’s major scoops that expose wrongdoing (as you’ll see), and yes, it’s stories that help influence legislation and activism (you’ll see that too). But it’s not enough to just publish big exposés or drill down on policy. The most important changes don’t always come right after publishing. Sometimes—often in fact—journalists hammer away at an issue for years before it breaks through in political debate or popular consciousness.

And sometimes the most meaningful change comes one person at a time: As the pandemic ramped up, Mojo reporter Fernanda Echavarri wrote about the plight of domestic workers, featuring a housecleaner whose clients abruptly canceled and left her without income after decades of loyalty. Several readers reached out to Fernanda to share their stimulus checks with the woman. Likewise this February, another reporter, Kiera Butler, reported on a town in Georgia that had begun vaccinating teachers, only to find the state yanking its entire supply of vaccines. The day after Butler’s story appeared, the town got its shots back.

To us, these smaller but significant impacts are just as important as the bigger, high-visibility scoops that our reporters routinely land, as when Mother Jones broke the story of Mitt Romney’s 47 percent remarks in 2012, altering the course of a presidential campaign. Or when our reporter went inside a private prison to show what for-profit incarceration really looks like, before the federal government began phasing out the use of these contractors.

It can take more than a news cycle to really see change happening. Mojo’s dogged reporting on the Trump campaign’s links to Russia, his coddling of extremist groups, and his unprecedented conflicts of interest elevated these issues into public conversation and prompted other newsrooms to begin digging into them too. Our team has focused on voting rights and voter suppression since 2017, helping establish one of the core priorities of those seeking to defend democracy. And a decade ago, when many in the media retreated from covering the climate emergency, we put together a multi-newsroom coalition to ramp up climate journalism; finally, news organizations everywhere are prioritizing this beat.

This has always been a defining feature of Mother Jones: looking over the news horizon to give the world a heads-up about what’s coming our way.

For journalism to have an impact, it’s not enough to “build it and they will come”: Our stories need to get out there beyond the choir of news junkies. At Mojo, everyone works to make sure our stories land with the widest possible audience—through other media, via social platforms, and as videos, podcasts, and data visualizations that expand our reach all over the country, across age, gender, race, and ethnicity. On social media, we find that a significant share of our audience doesn’t follow other news sources. They find something in our reporting that speaks to them when other outlets don’t.

Perhaps the most compelling measure of impact comes from readers we might not have expected to reach. Some years ago, we assigned Julia Lurie to cover the opioid epidemic full-time (a first for a national publication). After we published her story about how the opioid crisis was hitting families in Ohio, a woman who described herself as a “Christian conservative Republican” wrote her this email:

I cannot thank you enough for your work on the opioid crisis. I cried after reading your story. I have never emailed the writer of anything I have read online. But your story has really touched me. There is so much hurt, guilt and blame to go around. We may have different views on politics or how to fix this problem. But I would hope that we can all come together to help these children who are, by far, the biggest victims in the opioid crisis.

That’s not the splashiest impact story you’ll ever read, but it gets at something that matters a lot. Making a difference is not just about the number of people that you reach or the number of times a story gets picked up in other media, it’s not just about the policies that change or the corrupt officials who get indicted as a result (though all of these are vital). It’s also about how storytelling can really change how people look at something—if it’s done with intention, with a human face, and with a genuine push to reach people with respect and empathy.

What follows is our take on how Mother Jones’ reporting had an impact this past year.

Monika Bauerlein, CEO
So what does impact look like? It’s reporting that’s fueled change by being cited in legislation or challenged unjust systems; that’s gone viral and shifted the narrative in our society; that centers marginalized and oppressed people; that inspires bucking conventional wisdom and making change—to ensure that the American experiment in democracy can thrive. In 2020, *Mother Jones*’ reporting on immigration embodied all of these qualities. Here’s a case study in what journalism with impact looks like.

**IMPACT:**

*Case Study*
Amplifying Voices

There is perhaps no issue that ties together more strands of American political life than immigration. Reporters Fernanda Echavarri and Noah Lanard lead our immigration coverage, zeroing in on how policy impacts the daily lives of those in the communities most affected, whether in Guatemala or Mexico, along the border, or in cities around the country.

In 2020, the duo covered the crisis at the heart of every problem in America's immigration system—sometimes in real time.

In a harrowing first-person account from a detention center in Louisiana, Noah shared the stories of women who were pepper-sprayed by ICE when they asked for soap to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. He was the only journalist who spoke to the widow of a man who died of COVID after being released from ICE detention. “The fact is that ICE killed this man,” Noah says. “And it’s the type of thing you can easily miss.”

No aspect of the immigrant experience escaped Trump’s cruelty. Fernanda profiled farmworkers churned up by pandemic bureaucracy; a Dreamer and essential worker left in limbo by the Trump administration; and a housecleaner whose regular work dried up overnight.
as 2020’s crises mounted. “I make it a priority not to talk about people, but to talk to people,” Fernanda says about her approach.

**Shifting Narratives**

The human toll of the Trump administration’s immigration policies can be hard to grasp. A package put together by Noah, Fernanda, and editorial director Ian Gordon, published on the eve of the election, vividly told eight immigrants’ stories. Fernanda says that the intent here was “to force [the reader] to think about [it] as an issue affecting Juan or Joe and not just an abstract concept of immigration. I wanted us [to be able to say], “Think about it this way when you’re voting. I want us to plant that flag before Election Day.”

**Challenging Systems**

*Mother Jones* reporting also reflected just how diverse America’s Latino voters are, grappling with an election-defining dynamic well before our peers caught on. Fernanda shone a light on a new movement of activism and voter engagement that led to Arizona turning blue, while Noah trailed a young Cuban YouTube influencer who foretold Biden’s loss in Florida. “*Mother Jones* takes people to places they definitely would not otherwise go,” Noah says. “We confound their expectations about what kind of country this is.”

**Fueling Change**

Noah’s trailblazing stories have been cited in half a dozen lawsuits brought by immigration lawyers and advocacy groups, including one filed in October that cited how deadly COVID was for guards as well as detainees. In February 2021, a group of Democratic senators led by Elizabeth Warren and Cory Booker called for abuse investigations at immigration detention centers. The letter cited six of Noah’s stories. Five of Noah’s 2020 detention investigations were deployed by the ACLU in April to demand the closure of all ICE immigration detention centers.

**Going Viral**

In addition to mentions throughout English-language media, Fernanda was featured three times on *El Hilo*, one of the biggest Spanish-language radio podcasts on the planet—reaching a new and highly influential global audience that *Mother Jones* might not have otherwise reached. This is journalism that fosters real change in living rooms and congressional hearing rooms.

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In their own words

Listen to the women who were pepper-sprayed by ICE—and Noah and Fernanda—tell these stories in their own words:

- **ICE Detainees Got Pepper-Sprayed After Demanding Coronavirus Help**
- **Latinx Activists Are Closer Than Ever to Flipping Arizona**
1.9 MILLION VIEWS OF OUR VOTING RIGHTS VIDEOS

1,300 MEDIA MENTIONS OF MOJO’S VOTING RIGHTS REPORTING
When our reporting exposes systems and institutions that are inequitable, unjust, or intentionally misleading, it not only challenges those systems, but it influences other news outlets (and sometimes the justice system), spurring coverage and ensuring bad behavior no longer escapes notice.

**IMPACT:**

Challenging Systems
(You Gotta) Fight for Your Right (to Vote)

Early in 2020, the Washington Post's Margaret Sullivan offered a stark warning: “The media is blowing its chance to head off an Election Day debacle.” Among the rare exceptions, she added, was Mother Jones’ Ari Berman, who directed laserlike focus to the GOP-led war on voting.

In 2020, Mother Jones threw everything at this crisis. We produced 200 unique pieces of content including 10 live events, 100 videos, 12 podcasts, nearly 80 web stories, and five magazine features. The videos included a series of brief explainers to demystify key issues and counter disinformation about voting (for example, how vote counting works, protecting the census, Rep. John Lewis' legacy, mail-in voting, and GOP plans to cement electoral power). One video of Ari debunking the most common myths about voting was viewed nearly 450,000 times on Twitter alone.

Ari turned the spotlight on the Trump administration’s effort to exclude whole classes of people, chiefly immigrants, from the 2020 census, which would have a dramatic effect on how congressional seats were allocated among the states. He examined how state officials were quietly purging huge numbers of people from the voter rolls. And as the COVID crisis took hold, he reported on the ways elected officials around the country were using the pandemic to impose new restrictions on the right to vote, with a disproportionate impact on young voters and voters of color—the very hurdles that would be front-page news a few months later.

The national press paid attention: MSNBC, CNN, and a slew of top podcasts clamored to book Ari for news appearances, and by the time the election rolled around, Ari’s reporting had wracked up 1,300 media mentions. Leaders including Stacey Abrams and Eric Holder joined Ari in Mother Jones’ event series and on our podcast. He was even invited to speak to NBA players about voting rights and the threat to our democracy.

The Secret Life of Natural Gas Influencers

It began in the spring of 2020. Why were there so many Instagram influencers who just couldn’t shut up about how great it was to cook with gas? Climate reporter Rebecca Leber looked into the world of gas influencers and what the industry was doing to ensure environmentally toxic gas was still hooked into all of our homes. Long interested in indoor air quality and building pollution, she wanted to learn more about what it would mean as we headed into a long, home-bound lockdown.

This led to a tip that the testimonials on the “Texans for Natural Gas” website were likely fake. Rebecca then broke the blockbuster story about an intricate web of consultancies working with the oil and gas industries to target women with their products. In the following
months, Rebecca mined a massive dump of industry executives' emails reacting to her first story, revealing further evidence of how the industry had infiltrated popular neighborhood networking site Nextdoor with gas company shills.

Rebecca's work on gas stoves lit a fire: Bill McKibben relied on her reporting for his piece in the *New Yorker*; she heard from shocked oil industry reps; and advocacy groups used her reporting in their pleas to lawmakers. Rebecca became the darling of national public radio programs, including WNYC’s *On the Media*, and sparked a conversation across ideological divides, from blogs to national broadsheets.

Perhaps most meaningfully, dozens of readers told us how this new reporting has led them to lobbying their own landlords to switch up their appliances to electric. The story leaped out of the climate bubble and right into people's lives, and encouraged them to reconsider a long-held assumption—a near-impossible feat in this media and information landscape, including some of our own reporters who lobbied landlords to replace their gas stoves.

**Donald Trump and the Case of the Mystery Loan**

*Mother Jones* was the first to report on a mysterious $50 million loan associated with Trump's Chicago property that he owes...to himself. When DC reporter Russ Choma called the office of the New York attorney general in the course of his reporting, they didn't have it on their radar. Now they do: In a 2020 court filing, the AG's office revealed that the loan is part of their investigation of *Trump* for fraud and tax evasion. Thank Russ for that.
1

INQUIRY INTO UNSAFE PRISON CONDITIONS

1

STATE CHANGES ITS RULES
If impact is measured in changes you can see, then writing a story and seeing a corporation, government, platform, or community right a wrong immediately is surely the impact we seek.

IMPACT:
Fueling Change
One Mask for You, None for Me
In May 2020, reporter Samantha Michaels discovered that most incarcerated New Yorkers did not have access to face masks, even though they were sewing masks for hospitals. Later that day, state officials announced they would start providing masks to everyone in state prisons—a change that a local advocacy group attributed to her investigation.

Stopping the Spread of COVID Misinformation
Misinformation ran rampant during the early days of the COVID pandemic. Abigail Weinberg was the first to report on a dubious missive from CVS’s chief medical officer to their 300,000 employees touting the therapeutic qualities of...drinking warm water. Within days, CVS corrected its guidance.

WhatsApp, already well-known for spreading nonsense and quackery, became, in Sinduja Rangarajan’s reporting, “a petri dish of coronavirus information.” Not three weeks later, based in part on Sinduja’s reporting, WhatsApp announced several changes aimed at combating this scourge on its platform.

Inspiring the Nursing Home Lives Matter Movement
Low-income populations living with comorbidities are disproportionately Americans of color—a group targeted unsparingly by the coronavirus. Welcome to New York City’s elder-care crisis, where coronavirus deaths were undercounted by as much as 50 percent. As the emergency deepened in April 2020, Molly Schwartz reported on Coler, a New York City–run, long-term care facility where staff were thwarted by PPE shortages, and a city policy that saw COVID patients transferred back into nursing homes. Residents were scared, isolated, and increasingly frustrated. Molly’s reporting emboldened residents and activists to launch the Nursing Home Lives Matter movement.

Our most-read story in 2020 was “There’s a Facebook Post Going Viral Claiming to Be From Stanford. Don’t Believe It.”
When I think about the impact my reporting has had, I think about Kevin Sawyer. He’s a man who’s incarcerated at San Quentin Prison in California. But he’s also a journalist himself, and he’s been working really hard to cover a huge coronavirus outbreak at the prison, even after he got sick. This piece was shared pretty widely. It was shared by Chelsea Clinton, it was shared by activists, and it was shared by people who have family members incarcerated at San Quentin. This type of sharing on a piece is important for impact because a lot of people who are incarcerated have felt sort of invisible during the pandemic, even though they’ve been disproportionately affected. And so it’s important to be able to get their voice out and have people all over the country see how they’re feeling. After it published, he wrote me a really nice handwritten letter, expressing what he thought. He said, “Years ago, I was told one of the best compliments someone can give to a journalist is to tell them, ‘I read your entire article.’ To your credit, I’ve read your piece no less than five times and will continue to read it. I sometimes learn about myself when I’m viewed through the eyes of another.” Even after the story has finished, Kevin and I have stayed in touch. I’ve never met him in person, but we continue to write letters back and forth pretty regularly. A lot of times, people who are in prison can be forgotten by many people on the outside, and the struggles that they’re going through and the injustices that they’re facing are not always remembered, and I wanted them to be remembered.

—Samantha Michaels, Reporter

Covering the pandemic as a Mother Jones reporter was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity because I got COVID-19. And not only did I have a front-row seat to the circus—my body was the circus. And there were so many questions that I needed to answer for myself and for Mother Jones readers. What was happening in my body at a cellular level? Could I develop immunity? What about these blood plasma trials that I kept hearing about in New York City here, where the epidemic was raging at the time? And so as a reporter, I got on the phone and I started asking questions. I asked lots and lots of scientists and doctors what was going on inside my body and I started to learn two really interesting things. The first one was that there was some hope that on a cellular level, my body could remember COVID-19 and mount a similar defense against it if it encountered the virus again in the future. And that’s really key when we think about how successful the vaccines have become in the United States. The second thing I learned was that, as a gay man, there was still these outdated laws about how I could give blood to these new and promising trials that were emerging at the time. One stigma attached to the AIDS crisis, a form of pandemic, may be preventing new and interesting things being discovered about this new global pandemic. And so I got to work on what was holding this up, how could we make change on this front, and I discovered that after I published this story about gay men being limited on this front, the FDA the next day began to ease their roles. I hope on some small level my reporting really made a difference on that front and having this front-row seat to the coronavirus crisis—because I was affected so personally—provided Mother Jones readers, listeners, and viewers like you an opportunity to get up close and personal with the real stakes of the coronavirus pandemic.

—James West, Deputy Editor
9 MILLION VIEWS ON TWITTER

1 GALVANIZED NATION
It’s our job to amplify voices that might otherwise be shouted down—or ignored completely. If our work gets seen by millions and becomes an instrument of accountability and justice? All the better.

**IMPACT:**

Amplifying Voices
A Historic Reckoning

2020 saw the convergence of Trump’s racist authoritarianism, a pandemic that disproportionately hit people of color, and massive demonstrations for racial justice. Our racial justice reporting took on a new urgency.

Reporters Nathalie Baptiste and Jamilah King paired rigorous reporting with sharp insights as young Black women. Their columns offered much-needed reality checks, especially for those minimizing or deflecting their own culpability in perpetuating systemic racism. Nathalie bookended the summer with two memorable essays, “‘Not Who We Are?’ This Is All America Has Ever Been” and “There Are No Black Victims in Trump’s America,” arguing that America’s racism is a feature, not a bug. Jamilah, in her essay “This Summer Is Going to Be Long, Violent, and Necessary,” proclaimed, “America’s long, violent summer has begun. Buildings will burn and people will die because people have been dying—in their homes, at local hospitals, and in detention centers. It would be naive and downright dangerous to expect anything different.”

It was this call to action that propelled our journalists out of their homes and into the streets to cover the largest protest movements in a generation. Julia Lurie reported from the epicenter of the protests in Minneapolis, highlighting video evidence of cops slashing tires of protesters, which became our most viral tweet of the year, with more than 9 million views.

Our single-topic September-October issue, “The End of Policing as We Know It,” connected the history of policing to the political power of police unions, the treatment of immigrants in federal detention, and activists working for change. Our reporting led to a trio of stories about policing and housing in Oakland that were nominated for the ASME National Magazine Awards in a new category: Community Journalism.

Conspiracies Run Amok

In February 2020, our disinformation reporter Ali Breland explored how QAnon adherents were showing up in fewer and fewer numbers at Trump rallies, an encouraging sign, he thought. But by August, Ali was
reporting on QAnon’s disturbing resurgence, reinvigorated by Trump and the pandemic, and by November, voters were sending QAnon supporters to Congress. The troubling movement concerned Americans: one of our most-read stories in 2020 was Ali’s mind-boggling article “Why Are Right-Wing Conspiracies so Obsessed With Pedophilia?”

Ali tore the lid off this conspiracy, which claims to be about protecting kids, reporting that the person identified as Q appeared closely linked to child pornography domains. In another scoop, he revealed how a Facebook group called “Stop the Count” was part of a coordinated campaign by Republican operatives to promote what would become Trump’s Big Lie—offering the first comprehensive look at the organizers and their methods.

Our reporters revealed how these conspiracy theories, weaponized by the far right, were then supercharged by wellness influencers and congressional power players alike. We wouldn’t be Mother Jones without backing this with rigorous number-crunching, attractively packaged: With data journalist Sinduja Rangarajan, Ali detailed a striking rise in extremist conspiracy posts by followers of seemingly unrelated lifestyle and wellness sites on Twitter. Their reporting was shared widely by politicians, activists, and influencers, and cited in an HBO documentary.

3.2 million views across all platforms. The video “How QAnon Is Mutating for 2020” was our most-watched video on IGTV in 2020.

Across 60 episodes, the Mother Jones Podcast charted 2020’s twists and turns by presenting an unflinching examination of inequalities made starker by interlocking crises: the ways stigma from previous pandemics was hurting the chances of fighting this one; the deepening divide between the digital haves and have-nots; and a painful but galvanizing assessment of our current moment in the wake of George Floyd’s death.

Click to hear clips from this year’s seminal episodes:

- Online Learning During the Pandemic Is Extra Tough Where Wifi Is Illegal
- This Summer Is Going to Be Long, Violent, and Necessary
"I just really appreciate your compassion and your diligence," she said.

So I was in Minneapolis during the protests after the murder of George Floyd. I also spent a lot of time at a former hotel that had turned into a pop-up homeless shelter during the protests, and it literally emerged out of the ashes. And it was this prime example of mutual aid popping up all over the city and it was also a hotbed for advocacy and activists. So after this article about the hotel, and the advocacy around it, published, leaders drummed up money to support one of the homeless individuals who had been featured in the story. But I think, for me, the most meaningful response came from a woman who I featured in the article who I called Angela, and she's a volunteer at the shelter who had sent me a voice memo after the article was published. Angela is a Minneapolis resident who works at the University of Minnesota library that houses a lot of the Black history archives. She was one of the people who was on the frontlines of the protests. She really wanted future generations to look back at this, this moment in history, when a city mobilized in the wake of this brutal killing, and to be able to learn from it. In her voice memo she was quiet and she said, ‘I just really appreciate your article and reporting and your compassion and your diligence.’ And she said, 'I hope you can hear that in this recording.' You know, as a reporter, you of course want to have the splashy impact. But for me, what's equally meaningful and often more meaningful is the quiet, intimate response from people who are featured in your reporting, who you'd really gotten to know over the course of reporting a story. And in particular, with someone like Angela, who had spent so much time with me and also whose job is literally to help preserve history, getting a response like that meant the world to me.

—Julia Lurie, Reporter

“I have the ability to use my own voice in my reporting.”

A lot of traditional newsrooms have this idea of objective reporting, and obviously, you know, I care about fairness in my reporting. I do a lot of in-depth investigative pieces. But at Mother Jones, I also have the ability to be using my own voice in my reporting. And I've really learned to lean in into my different identities of being an immigrant, being a mom, being a person of color, and sort of bring those unique perspectives to my storytelling and bring the perspectives of these communities that I'm a part of to my reporting. At the beginning of the pandemic with COVID, there was just so much disinformation on platforms, different social media platforms. I was seeing that my friends and family on WhatsApp were sharing so many factually incorrect solutions for coronavirus or COVID prevention, and I wanted to write about it. I ended up writing about it and ended up talking to WhatsApp about it and asked them if there was more they could do to stop the spread or slow down the spread of disinformation. And after the piece was released, WhatsApp actually changed some of its policies and implemented some of the solutions that we'd raised in our piece during our reporting based on the work that some of the researchers have done. So getting a big technology giant to sort of change their policies, but using your own personal reporting to get at that story, was very meaningful. I love working for Mother Jones because it's an investigative newsroom that does a lot of deep investigative pieces and produces a lot of good impact. But I also like something very special about this newsroom, very unique about this newsroom, which is that it allows me to bring my whole self to work.

—Sinduja Rangarajan, Data and Interactives Editor
LEAKED VIDEO OF TRUMP ON A HOT MIC

7.5 MILLION VIEWS ...AND COUNTING
Conventional wisdom says journalism has the greatest impact when reach and traffic go up. We don’t always subscribe to conventional wisdom, but sometimes, when it means holding the powerful to account by driving audiences to our reporting on autocrats, plutocrats, and despots, we'll take it.

**IMPACT:**

Going Viral
Caught on Tape...Again

In August, Mother Jones obtained a copy of a hot-mic video of Donald Trump filmed during a deposition for a lawsuit filed against Trump University. “This tape shows Trump in the wild,” wrote David Corn in his companion article. While it wasn’t necessarily a surprise, it was jarring, in the manner of the Access Hollywood video and others, to see his bragging, griping, and manipulations displayed so clearly, right there, on camera. In the fevered run-up to the 2020 election, this video was viewed 7.5 million times—and is still viewed upward of 50,000 times a month on YouTube.

Video Games for Plutocrats

When Michael Bloomberg ran for president, the former New York City mayor controlled a greater net worth than all the other Democratic presidential candidates combined. Digital producer Mark Helenowski set about showing this mind-boggling disparity in a data animation visualizing the CEO’s staggering $62.8 billion fortune.

The video, posted just hours before Bloomberg appeared in his first live televised debate, was an instant viral hit, having tapped into one of the campaign’s defining themes: how wealth shaped Bloomberg’s policies. "Knowing how much privilege and power that money translates to in real life makes it all the more shocking—disturbing, even," Fast Company wrote about the video. By summer 2020, the video had 1.2 million views.

The video was the first of a three-part series exploring similarly mind-numbing aspects of America’s wealth inequality. As the pandemic raged and plunged the country into economic peril, Mark produced a second video that illustrated how a cadre of 643 Forbes-certified billionaires grew their collective wealth by an estimated $685 billion, from mid-March through early August 2020. The final video tackles student debt, showing how, since the Great Recession in 2008, student debt has been among the fastest-growing types of debt, faster than mortgages, auto loans, and credit card debt.

53.4 million views of our videos in 2020, more than in any previous year.
100 DAYS DOCUMENTED IN OUR TIMELINE

1 FAILED ADMINISTRATION’S CRISIS RESPONSE
Often we’re ringing the alarm bells on a coming crisis long before any of our peers. By painstakingly documenting what we’re seeing in investigations, easy-to-use timelines, and databases, we change the conversation.

**IMPACT:**

*Shifting Narratives*
Timelines of Cheats, Frauds, and Criminals

As it became clear that the Trump administration’s corrupt and bungled response to the coronavirus pandemic would come to define 2020, *Mother Jones* rushed to archive the dizzying daily deluge of news in our indispensable timeline “Superspreader in Chief,” featuring more than 300 detailed daily entries.

*Mother Jones* has done this before. Our massive “Lie by Lie” interactive documented how we rushed into the Iraq War, and our database of gun violence covers nearly 40 years of mass shootings in the United States and has become the go-to resource for readers, journalists, and researchers.

How Facebook Screwed Us All

Facing increasing backlash for how it failed to respond to disinformation and propaganda during the 2016 election, Facebook modified its newsfeed algorithm in 2018—changes that Mark Zuckerberg said would improve the quality of information on its platform. But the truth was more sinister.

In October 2020, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Facebook discovered that this algorithm tweak would disproportionately harm right-wing “junk news” sites, because, well, their sites were junk. Meanwhile, Facebook senior managers instructed staff to manually adjust the filter even if it meant disproportionately harming progressive-leaning sites instead.

In response, engineers showed Facebook executives internal research showing that *Mother Jones* (among others) would take a big traffic hit—and along with it, hits to advertising revenue and donations. As CEO Monika Bauerlein and Editor-in-Chief Clara Jeffery wrote, “To be perfectly clear: Facebook used its monopolistic power to boost and suppress specific publishers’ content—the essence of every Big Brother fear about the platforms, and something Facebook and other companies have been strenuously denying for years.” *Mother Jones*—and Monika and Clara specifically—have been charting the harm Facebook had been doing to the publishing industry for all this time. But it was still a shock to find out that the alarm they were ringing for the field at large was echoing in our own hallways.

*Mother Jones* has weathered the storm, not without taking a few body blows, but only because of the support from you, our community of readers—a prescient business model in the current media landscape.

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2020 Firsts

For the first time ever, we produced a special edition of our print magazine, “The Plague,” which explored the link between corruption and Trump-induced pandemic turmoil.
The Fight to Protect Democracy
Washington, DC, bureau chief David Corn has long charted the evolution of Republican Party dogma, examining how it created permission for the rise (and fall) of Donald Trump. David's team of political reporters has unearthed fraud, malfeasance, and nepotism since the early days of Trump's campaign in 2015. We revealed scandals involving his debts to Deutsche Bank and how his presidential bid morphed from a privately financed campaign that shunned megadonors to one that benefitted from dark money.

It was impossible to predict exactly how bad it would get by the final year of his presidency, but it shouldn't have been, as David noted in his piece “Donald Trump's Corruption Is Killing Americans”:

The fundamental purpose of government is rather simple: protect the citizenry. Any deliberate perversion of this priority is an exercise of corruption—especially when that basic aim is supplanted by the goal of personal gain. That’s why Donald Trump's slow, ineffectual, self-serving, and deadly response to the coronavirus has been the most consequential act of corruption in the history of American governance.

Combine a corrupt president, a broken and diminished public health apparatus, and all-time low levels of trust in information, and voila! The plague year made everything we know about corruption even more dangerous, as money, in the form of PPP loans and government contracts, sloshed around donors and allies—not to mention his own businesses. Accountability crumbled, and the stage was set for an already vulnerable society to find comfort in rumors and fringe theories that originated on social media by Russian trolls, American ideologues, and others trying to manipulate their followers.

These conspiracy communities collided headlong with America's deep history of white supremacy and extremism. Long before most media caught on to the Trump campaign’s connections to extremist groups,

Mother Jones investigated how they were fueling and capitalizing on his rise. We first revealed that a white nationalist behind pro-Trump robocalls had been chosen as a convention delegate, and that Trump campaign manager Stephen Bannon boasted that his news site, Breitbart, was “the platform for the alt-right.” We probed Trump’s ties to hate groups and profiled “alt-right” architect Richard Spencer (not yet a national figure), tracing his disturbing evolution from prep school student into a charismatic leader rebranding the age-old politics of hate, and we went undercover with America’s resurgent right-wing paramilitary movement.

Our reporters showed how the troubling movement led to the inevitable in 2020: a more extreme gun rights movement; the racism behind selective calls for law and order; white supremacists at the Michigan statehouse;
and the federal assault on protest movements. And we reported how, in the waning days of his presidency, Trump engaged in a deliberate campaign of terrorism aimed at Americans who oppose him politically.

As the “Stop the Steal” movement ramped up, Republican-dominated state legislatures introduced hundreds of bills to suppress the vote. *Mother Jones* has been warning voters of this trend since the outcome of the last presidential election. Those who have put their fingers to the wind have found *Mother Jones* reporting to be a critical source of information for legislation, activism, legal action, and personal action. This is never so clearly demonstrated as when we look at the stories readers spent most time on in 2020—not a single one was written last year but they all cover themes and issues at the forefront all year long: about right-wing conspiracies and pedophilia; Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s decision not to retire; labor conditions at a global corporation; *Trump’s financial malfeasance* and self-dealing; and the murder of a Black child by police. They might not have been written in 2020 but any of them could have been. We’re often ahead of the curve when it comes to what will be important, which is why lawmakers—and changemakers—keep us at the top of their reading lists.
Looking back at the scope of impact in 2020, it’s staggering to see what we were able to achieve under, let’s say, “unique” circumstances. What feels most remarkable is the way our reporting has affected the lives of our readers, our reporters, and our communities. Have you had the experience of one of our stories changing the way you thought? We’d love for you to share it, by emailing monika@motherjones.com.

And sign up for our newsletter to get these kinds of stories in your inbox every day.