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Last updated February 15, 2021

To our school chapters & programs—

Today amid our global pandemic I share sad and unfortunate news: after a long and frankly remarkable 8-year run, the Project for Better Journalism (PBJ) will be permanently shutting down. I will outline rationale and next steps, as well as share some background about how we got here.

**We will plan to maintain all PBJ chapter websites thru June 15, 2021** (although see caveats below). This may be in a degraded state or without custom domain names, so we recommend taking steps to migrate away from PBJ sooner rather than later.

### What is happening?

PBJ is shutting down. This means that we will no longer be able to do the three things that we used to do for you:

- Host your school journalism website on our network.
- Pay for, and manage, your journalism website's domain name.
- Offer support and/or enrichment opportunities for your program.

### Support and enrichment opportunities are discontinued

First, we are immediately discontinuing support and enrichment opportunities – like curriculum support – for your journalism program. In truth, we have not offered this service in full earnest for over a year, and our support has been plagued by long response times and lost emails.

### Domain name services are discontinued

Second, we are immediately discontinuing renewals and inbound transfers of domain names. We are no longer in a position to be paying for anything, and domain names are a significant cost center for us at scale. They are also exceptionally complex to manage on a technical level. We are asking all schools to transfer their domain names away and to a service they manage themselves.

*If you have a domain name that is managed by PBJ, please contact us at once to request a EPP or “transfer authorization” code. We will unlock your domain name and provide you with the code, which you can use to transfer and renew your domain name at a registrar of your choice.*

We recommend NameCheap or Google Domains as top domain registrars. We do not recommend GoDaddy. We also recommend retaining control of your domain name and “pointing” it at the company that hosts your

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website rather than transferring it to them directly. This is like ensuring that your tenant is not also your locksmith, and helps to avoid circumstances, ironically, exactly like this one.

*If you do not transfer your domain name or make further actions, we will allow your domain name to expire on its existing expiration date. You can check what the renewal date is using any “WHOIS” lookup tool, such as <https://whois.domaintools.com/>. This will almost certainly be fewer than 4-6 months out, which means urgency is important.*

If or when your domain name expires, your domain name will not be available for renewal or transfer until 60-90 days after the expiration date, when it will be released by our domain registrar to the public domain. Further, some domain names may already be expired due to lack of upkeep over the past few months. This is not ideal and we sincerely apologize for this challenge.

PBJ websites will still continue to function without a domain name. Every chapter has a website at [state-school.chapters.betterjournalism.org](https://state-school.chapters.betterjournalism.org). For example, a TX school named Peanut Butter High School would have a website at [tx-peanut-butter.chapters.betterjournalism.org](https://tx-peanut-butter.chapters.betterjournalism.org). You can continue to use this address through the final shutdown date (see below).

### **Chapter websites will be supported until June 15, and then discontinued**

We will try our best and support chapter websites until the end of the school year, June 15, 2021. This means that, barring even more extraordinary circumstances, your website should continue to be online. You will continue to be able to update it and add new content. You and your students will be able to log in.

If you have other options, we don't recommend continuing to use the chapter website. Since PBJ is shutting down and since we're not supporting our domain name program anymore, you should consider this as a stopgap measure to get you across the finish line for this school year, and not as part of a long-term strategy.

We are funding the final months of operation from last-minute donations from our own staff pockets. This means that certain components of service that cost a lot to run—namely, hosting of pictures, video, and audio—may be limited, degraded, or shut down earlier.

Where can you switch to? There are many service providers available, including those that are generic and those specific to school journalism programs. Our recommendations are

- *Specific to school journalism:* School Newspapers Online (SNO)
- *Generic services:* WordPress.com

Why are we recommending SNO now? We have criticized SNO in the past due to

- Their high prices (costing 100-1000x what these services should cost), which has placed their services out of contention for most of our low-income or Title 1 schools. Also note their itemized pricing for various features like sports or class rosters, which can quickly add up.

- Lackluster website design, which was a common criticism we heard back in 2010 when first starting PBJ and which has not meaningfully improved in over 10 years.

However, SNO continues to offer a robust product and excels at providing support, billing, and invoicing that is tuned to the needs of schools. Their pricing, while high, appeals to the purchase-order-driven process that many public schools demand. They also, quite frankly, have the best track record between SNO and PBJ of continuing to exist. If you can afford it and don't mind the caveats, **SNO is the best option for you**. At this point, they also have quite a bit of experience in migrating websites to and from PBJ. We will try our best to play a supportive role as many of our chapters become their customers.

If you want more flexibility, consider WordPress.com or hosting your own version of WordPress on one of the many hosting providers that offer this service. Your costs will be 100x lower, you will retain full control (and the ability to switch to something like SNO if you need later down the line), and you will have many choices over design, style, and more. This comes at the caveat of less personalized support for the school journalism use case, and potential hassles with creating individual user accounts.

PBJ, SNO, and WordPress.com are all run by the WordPress *software*, which means that you will be able to import and migrate content between all 3, and off of PBJ, without compatibility issues.

### **Exports from PBJ are available**

In preparation for the migration, we have disabled all dashboard limitations. These were enabled in the past to avoid clutter and confusion. Now, all export features are available when you log in via Tools > Export.

When exporting your data, keep in mind:

- Exports will bring all content, but there may be small incompatibility challenges depending on where you import your data. For example, some of the special fields that PBJ uses – like the “highlights” or authors feature – may not map cleanly. You may want to migrate those fields yourself.
- Exports will link to media content like photos or videos. This means that they will continue to point to PBJ's servers even after the import. This is a WordPress limitation. You will need to use a solution that migrates the media content itself as well. While we can't offer any specific guidance for each scenario, you can search online for “wordpress import with attachments” to find useful tutorials.
- Your PBJ Options, like the design of your homepage, are unique to PBJ's product and cannot be migrated.

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## How did we get here?

PBJ has always operated on a thin budget. This has in part been driven by our thesis that operating school journalism websites is not something that should cost very much money to schools, and that an external provider like ourselves can benefit from economies of scale and technology.

Further, we have also operated on an all-volunteer staff, driven by our thesis that these websites are not complex and that – with the right self-help resources and onboarding – we can avoid substantial costs like payroll.

This framework was very effective for quite some time. For context, it has cost PBJ, on average, less than \$40/year per school chapter, including occasional exceptional costs, to operate your website. (This may be something worth considering as you think about your next provider.) We have been funded by various family foundations, educational foundations, and grant support. We benefited from a robust team of volunteers that operated everything from onboarding to technology improvement. At most points in time, we had over 3 years of runway in the bank.

Unfortunately, some costs balloon more than we expect and some sources of funding shrink faster than we expect – particularly when a pandemic comes along.

By 2019, with 500+ chapters, we shouldered a domain name renewal burden that was not only substantially more expensive than we expected (domain name costs do not tend to benefit from scale; we pay \$10-15/year for each), but more technically challenging to maintain than we hoped.

Further, we began dealing with a large number of “denial of service” attacks that frequently plagued us even from our inception. These cyber-attacks are actually quite commonplace for companies that host websites, and although we took preventative measures, these attacks took a financial toll each time we ate the bandwidth and computing costs.

Finally, an all-volunteer staff is simply difficult to wrangle. While we have focused our volunteer base on tech-sector employees with extra time, this has not been as successful as I hoped.

By 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, we found it difficult to gain the attention of philanthropic foundations that had shifted their resources to other important causes. Like most other 501(c)(3) organizations, we are funded by numerous one-time grants. This means that, when money runs out, we must go and ask for more. In 2020, there were a lot more people asking.

PBJ has also historically relied on significant in-kind donations from technology service companies that keep our service running. These are anywhere from discounted hosting costs to service credits. Most in-kind donations have been exhausted.

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It is my hope that our cause is not ended. Student journalism, particularly in the virtual education era of COVID-19, is more important than ever as a program that congregates students together virtually and productively. But it's always been more, shining a beacon of light on our most challenging problems, and offering a space for students to be empowered and create solutions.

When I look at the programs that PBJ has supported over these past 8 years, I am filled with gratitude and awe at what thousands of participating students have accomplished. In this time,

- Students who participated in PBJ programs have graduated high school and college to become full-time journalists, including at major publications, where they continue their important work.
- Students have reported and opined on the events of our world, including Black Lives Matter, politics, the election, the pandemic, and more. Some of this reporting has received awards and accolades by serious institutions.
- Students have investigated and even, remarkably, held local institutions to a higher standard – including in one case pushing a school administration to further investigate, and act on, sexual misconduct. (I know not every K-12 school newspaper is empowered to do such work. Nevertheless, I hope we all appreciate a world with more justice.)
- PBJ's inter-school collaboration programs—of which we ran too few, but which included everything from journalist guest speakers to a joint publication defining culture and belonging—were a success, bringing together one of the most diverse school groups across the country of any school extracurricular.

I hope this work continues, and it starts with each and every school. While PBJ will no longer be an official partner in this work, we are rooting for you from the sidelines.

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