
General Periodicals

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SINCE THE SECOND WORLD WAR a number of significant works have appeared which are severely critical of certain aspects of contemporary American life. These aspects are the social and cultural concomitants of today's prosperous, essentially middle-class, urban and suburban civilization. Mass culture and other developments engendered by the mass media have been some of the primary targets of these critics. "The mass media aim at pleasing the average of consumer tastes; they standardize what they produce, and standardization or homogenization is the death of art. The mass media cannot foster art; they replace it. The temptations of the mass market (money, prestige, and power) seduce and direct potential talent from the creation of art, and contribute further to its decline."¹ As one important segment of the mass media, the general magazines have come in for their share of this criticism. But these critics, for the most part, have been members of the intellectual elite who, after all, could hardly be expected to take any other position, and the magazine industry, which has become relatively inured to such critics, has not deigned to reply.

However, there have been other, less lofty critics. J. P. Wood, commenting upon the need for a new edition of his book on magazines, noted dourly some of the changes from 1949 to 1956: "There is more factual, less imaginative, material in most of the big general magazines. Throughout, there is less literature, more journalism. The feature article has replaced the familiar essay. Fiction in many magazines has given way to the exploitation of 'personalities' in biographies or ghost-written autobiographies. In editorial content the once valid distinction between class and mass magazines has virtually disappeared. Similarity of subject choice and treatment is more and more apparent."²

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Another observer of the magazine world, in assessing the character of the general magazines, found that due primarily to their commercial nature, they had made little contribution to serious literature because they exploit rather than discover talent, that there was little experimentation, and that articles too often answered "what" instead of "why."³ Possibly the most severe, and certainly the most direct, criticism was made in a speech to the Magazine Publishers' Association. Leo Burnett, head of a large advertising agency, declared that magazines were at their "lowest ebb of editorial excellence" in the last forty years. The blame for this he laid at the feet of the business departments which were exerting too much influence upon editorial decisions in order to increase circulation at all costs. The results were "uniformity and conformity" at a time when criticism and analysis were needed.⁴ His comments were considered substantial enough to be adapted for a guest editorial in the *Saturday Review*.⁵

There is no question that business departments do have a voice in magazine publishing which, after all, is a business, dependent upon both circulation and advertising for its revenues. The income from circulation is generally the smaller and, as a matter of fact, a publisher usually sells the copies of his magazine for less than cost, depending upon advertising revenues to make up the difference. Though issues are sold at a loss, by selling more of them, the publisher can raise his advertising rates and attract more advertisers, the additional revenues from these more than compensating for the additional cost of printing more copies. Magazine publishing, then, is a business which depends primarily upon advertising which, in turn, is based upon circulation.

When television made its first impact, publishers feared its effect upon sales, but it was soon evident that while television cut down the reading time of new set owners, after the novelty wore off, reading regained most of its losses. The only permanent adverse effect, it seems, was upon the circulation of the "below-middle-brow" magazines—the romance, confession, detective, and movie titles. The "high-brow" magazines, such as the *New Yorker*, *Atlantic*, and *Holiday*, more than doubled their circulation; the "middle-brow" titles—*Life*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Parents' Magazine*, etc.—increased their circulation by about half. The conclusion reached by the study reporting these circulation changes was that reading tastes had become more sophisticated, and that television affected the reading habits of persons whose reading had consisted almost solely of escapist litera-

ture. For this group, television was a more convenient substitute for reading.⁶ A similar conclusion was reached in a study of the influence of television upon children. It showed that "television shifts the center of gravity in children's magazine reading from the pulps and the more violent and sensational magazines toward the general and quality magazines."⁷

The early concern over television's reducing magazine readership, then, proved groundless. And, in fact, in the twenty years from 1940 to 1960, magazine circulation increased from about 95 million to 188 million. Some of this increase was due to the higher level of literacy and educational achievement and to the fact that there are simply more people who have more money and more leisure time. Another reason—one which has had a more immediate effect upon the content and appearance of magazines—has been the exceptional efforts by publishers to increase circulation. This so-called "race for numbers," using such promotional devices as bargain rates, new, flashy formats, or spectacular features by famous personalities, has been widely criticized within the industry itself, but publishers have been forced into it by two circumstances.

First, publication costs have soared and have necessitated additional revenues from advertising to meet these costs. *The Reader's Digest*, for example, so successful for thirty-three years without advertising, was forced in 1955 to accept advertising. An even more striking case of the results of soaring costs is the recent announcement that *Coronet*, despite a circulation of over three million, would cease publication. Second, television, which had increased its advertising revenues from virtually nothing to over 1.5 billion dollars in fifteen years, seemed to threaten the very life of the magazine industry by reducing its share of the advertising dollar. Indeed, the demise of such giants as *Collier's* and the *Women's Home Companion* was attributed by some to the effects of television. More likely their disappearance was due to a number of other factors, although television may have hastened the process,⁸ but the concerned industry felt that it had to counteract this trend by increasing circulation.

Along with showing increased circulation figures, publishers have tried to attract advertisers with the claim that advertising is more effective in magazines than on a television screen. The argument is that "radio and television tend to reach all ages and income and cultural levels, while reading is correlated with education. It would seem apparent, then, that radio and television have become by and

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large the mass media, while magazines tend to reach a selective audience."⁹ Publishers have also wooed advertisers with new devices and methods that have made magazine advertising more flexible and appealing. The most important of these is the use of regional editions which permit national advertisers to localize their campaigns and regional advertisers to benefit from the prestige of a major national medium. Other new features include inserts of special printed matter such as catalogs, recipes, and other small booklets; cooperative advertising; samples of products mounted on the printed page; dramatic uses of photographs, color, and other new graphic art techniques; metallic inks, special papers, folded pages, even perfumed ink.^{10, 11} The success of this campaign was evidenced in 1960 when, for the first time since television became a competitor, magazines increased their total advertising revenue more than did television.¹²

For the magazine audience, a more important result of the efforts to increase circulation has been the change in content. There has been a steady improvement in the intellectual level of articles; publishers seem to have tried to make even more of the disparity in cultural tastes by increasing the distance between the appeal of magazines and the appeal of television. Less fiction is being published, but much of what is, is of more substance. Unfortunately, quality in this case has been interpreted primarily in terms of established authors who can attract larger audiences. But this interpretation in turn has had one happy effect: by reducing the amount of fiction, and limiting it to well known authors, the major magazines have indirectly been a factor in the renaissance of the literary magazine. Some of these, especially the ones issued by the paperback book publishers and enjoying their distribution methods, have reached sales that would be considered phenomenal by the little magazines of former years. A similar limitation upon new fiction has been observed in British periodicals. Writing on the importance of the little magazine in the present literary scene, an English author and editor wrote: "Even the older established reviews—magazines of a very high literary standard, like *Encounter* . . . and *London Magazine* . . . have been more and more concerned with political and social conditions, rather than pure literature."¹³

This comment points to another development in the general magazine—the greater space given to current affairs. A major function of the magazine has always been to interpret and analyze the news and to provide background material, a function that lies somewhere be-

tween that of the newspaper and the book. In recent years popular concern with foreign affairs has increased and the importance of magazines as media of information in this field has grown markedly, even more than that of newspapers or books. American newspaper coverage of foreign affairs has long been criticized for its scantiness but, despite today's crucial need for such coverage, a recent study shows that the proportion of foreign news carried by the average daily newspaper has remained fairly stable since 1910.¹⁴ Moreover, even for major events newspapers provide little background material or analysis of the significance of these events.

Books can provide the maximum perspective, but today's events move so fast that a book on some current situation is outdated by the time it is published. Recently, two books on the Congo were reviewed together. The reviewer praised the books, but commented:

Anyone asking about the recent renaissance of serious magazines may be presented, as an answer, with a copy of either of these sound little books. . . . Events of immense portentousness are simply moving too fast for the 'lead-time' of American book publishers—not only events in Africa but also in space, defense, Latin America and so on. . . . I wish we had the assessments and opinions of [these two authors on the events of the last few months]. . . . But to get them we will have to refer to articles in magazines like *Encounter*, the *Saturday Review*, and *Commentary*—which are perforce becoming the library of the man who wants to keep up with the modern political world.¹⁵

There are numerous examples illustrating this development. A content analysis study of leading general magazines showed that between 1947 and 1957 the *New Yorker* "abandoned its long-time trade mark, the profile . . . for first-hand experience and overseas reporting. . . . The *Atlantic* shifted from its '47 emphasis on science to a '57 concern with overseas events."¹⁶ The *Reporter*, devoted primarily to political matters, started publication in 1949 and now enjoys a circulation of about 130,000. *Holiday*, as "slick" a magazine as that word can connote, came out editorially in 1959 with an earnest appeal for the support of the United Nations and its affiliated agencies; succeeding issues contained articles devoted to the work of these organizations, and in March 1961, the magazine received an award from the American Association for the United Nations in recognition of this series. The growth of the weekly news magazines; the recent addition to *Life* of a section summarizing the week's news; the appearance of a periodical for the general public, *Atlas*, which contains only material

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from newspapers and periodicals published outside the United States; these are other examples of this development. A superficial examination of entries in the *Readers' Guide* also bears out this trend. In three volumes, approximately the same size, indexing about the same number of titles but published a decade apart, under the heading "United States-Foreign Relations," the July 1937-June 1939 volume contains thirteen and one-half columns of entries; the May 1947-April 1949 volume, sixteen and one-half columns; the March 1957-February 1959 volume, 31 columns.

In 1951 one observer wrote that in general the treatment of foreign news by the slick magazines "failed to go much beyond reportage; few made any steady attempt to interpret, clarify, and inform. Only occasionally were articles carried in this field."¹⁷ But in ten years the coverage of foreign affairs by magazines had improved sufficiently that the *Foreign Policy Bulletin* could announce it was discontinuing publication because "there is no longer the vacuum of regular world news and comment which the *Bulletin* was designed to fill."¹⁸

This interest in world affairs is one indicator of the sophistication of today's magazine audience. If, because of the higher educational level and the cumulative effects of the communications revolution, this sophistication is more widespread than in past decades, because of the interest in world affairs it is also more genuine. *Vanity Fair* epitomized the sophistication of a former generation; recently an editor of it compared its era with the present, and questioned whether or not *Vanity Fair* deserved its reputation:

It is difficult to imagine any magazine as ignorant of, and as impervious and indifferent to, the major events in our country and in the world at large. . . . The real sophisticate is in and of his era; and a concern for the rest of the world is as much a part of his cultural logos as any knowledge of the arts or the amenities of good living. I think the most significant change is that today there is throughout the whole country a broadening of the mass base of sophistication as far as the arts are concerned, and a simultaneous widening of the peak to include a social conscience and a political development.¹⁹

The demand for quality by a large portion of the general magazine audience is another aspect of this sophistication. The three general class magazines, *Harper's*, the *Atlantic*, and the *Saturday Review*, have increased their combined circulation from about 400,000 in 1950 to almost 700,000 in 1960. The *New Yorker*, though perhaps not as stimu-

permit it to dispense with circulation promotions and also to turn away advertisers who it feels are not representative of its reputation.²⁰ *Esquire*, though always known for excellent fiction, was possibly even better known for its Petty Girl and articles such as "Latins Are Lousy Lovers." Now it has conceded the market for the risqué to *Playboy* (which has become more intellectual and sedate since its phenomenal success) and its host of imitators, and contains such solid stuff as a play by Thomas Wolfe, a report on the Black Muslims, the outlook for France after De Gaulle, a thorough account of the *Times Literary Supplement*, and a select group of regular columnists that includes Dorothy Parker and Dwight Macdonald. *Holiday's* concept of leisure is occasionally almost decadent (a concept that has reached perfection in *House Beautiful* and *House and Garden*), but more often it provides some fine examples of travel writing and essays on places, institutions, and personalities. Such pieces as that on New York by E. B. White, on Boston by J. P. Marquand, and others by a host of outstanding authors including Sean O'Faolain, Aubrey Menen, Ludwig Bemelmans, and the aforementioned series on the United Nations, have made *Holiday* one of the industry's showpieces of recent years, with a circulation of almost one million.

The beautifully produced *American Heritage* and *Horizon* are also showpieces of industry, and both are expensive; yet both have shown that large circulations are not incompatible with quality. The former's circulation is over 300,000, and *Horizon* had 145,000 subscribers even before the first number was issued. Three of the largest selling magazines have features which are a credit to the public taste: *Life's* art productions and scientific and historical series; the intelligent and frank explorations of controversial subjects in *Look*; the successful Adventures of the Mind series in the *Saturday Evening Post*. These essays, which began in 1958, have been on a rather high level and have covered a wide range of intellectual subjects in the sciences, arts, and letters. The response to them was immediate and highly favorable, and the size of readership proved to be far beyond the editors' fondest hopes. As a result the frequency of the assays was increased from every three to every two weeks, and sixteen publishing houses competed for the right to anthologize the first group.²¹

If there can be any real disappointment with the quality of a group of large circulation magazines, it is with the women's group, which has shown little improvement, other than technically, since the days of Edward Bok. The months between October 1944 and March 1945, included a presidential campaign and the historic conferences at

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Bretton Woods, Dumbarton Oaks, and Yalta. Yet, in examining the leading women's magazines during that period, "even the casual reader would be impressed with the solicitude which the editors displayed in protecting their subscribers from a knowledge of these events," and their remarks on the war were confined largely to its emotional impact on individuals.²² Later, in 1950, the editor of the *Women's Home Companion* hopefully declared that the subjects becoming of more and more interest to women were politics, atomic energy, "social problems, civic improvement, family relationships, psychiatric and psychological handling of children."²³ The latter subjects have certainly received their share of increased attention—possibly too much—but as for any presentation of the basic economic and political problems, there is still much to be desired. The mind is still not taxed. The "big three"—the *Ladies' Home Journal*, *McCall's*, and *Good Housekeeping*—have gone to promotional extremes in their much publicized competition; their appearance is superb, and their covers are full of promise. They offer famous novelists, leading political figures, outstanding personalities in the arts and entertainment, but "after reading one wonders whether the contributions of these famous people have added anything to their stature and your knowledge."²⁴

The supermarket magazines—*Woman's Day* and *Everywoman's Family Circle* being the two largest—do not have the prestige of the "big three" nor their circulation problems. For these reasons possibly, they have not been nearly as pretentious and have been much more sensible, though in recent years even they have shown some tendency toward the same type of superficial articles on the causes and treatment of emotional and physical problems. The titles that emphasize fashion and beauty—*Mademoiselle*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, *Seventeen*, and *Glamour*—appeal to their respective age and social groups, but they can also be criticized on the same ground of lack of social consciousness and, in addition, for their cult of the beautiful, their creation of artificial needs, their insincere, stereotyped fiction (with a few notable exceptions), and their superficial and casual treatment of personal matters. The trouble "with the women's magazines is not so much in bad advice proffered, but in the posture of omniscience covering everything from mysticism to obstetrics."²⁴ If the earlier criticisms of women's magazines as being intellectual wastelands are still appropriate, perhaps the story of their success is that they have only been giving women what they want.^{25, 26}

The increase in leisure time has been one postwar development

that has affected American reading habits. It has, as already noted, helped the circulation of all magazines. Also, it has had an effect upon the content of magazines. Two outstanding publishing successes of the postwar period, *Holiday* and *Sports Illustrated*, are devoted to leisure and recreation, and both have achieved circulations of almost one million. The home magazines have been one of the main beneficiaries of this new leisure; *Better Homes and Gardens*, for example, increased its circulation from 2,645,000 in 1946 to almost five million in 1960. Many of the general magazines have added features catering to the use of leisure time, such as sections on travel, reviews of books, television and radio programs, the theater and the movies, and recorded music is reviewed and commented upon in a number of magazines despite (or perhaps because of) the addition of several titles devoted to that field.

At the height of the popularity of the digest magazines some years ago, there was some pessimism as to the future of the full length article, and a similarly pessimistic view was advanced when the picture magazine first achieved its popularity. The pessimism now appears to have been unwarranted. Both *Life* and *Look* contain more and more text, and a recent study of the content of nine leading magazines concludes that "even in the age of pith, gist and boil-it-down-for-reading-on-the-run, mass readers will sit still for long thoughtful articles on topics that appeal to them. No industry wide shift toward brevity is revealed in the overall article product during the 10-year [1947 to 1957] interval, even in mass circulation journals."¹⁶

There is one real need in the world of American magazines that remains unfulfilled, and that is the need for a good weekly journal of opinion and dissent that is widely read. The English, of course, have a number of such journals, but in this country the need is particularly compelling because of the increase in one-newspaper towns, the canned editorials, and the standardized treatment of the news on radio and television. There is a handful of good weeklies, but even their combined circulation is depressingly small. Of the newer quality magazines only the *Reporter* regards itself as left-of-center, but though well written and fairly successful, it can hardly be regarded as an influential voice of dissident progressivism, such as the *Nation* and the *New Republic* once were.

The critics who chastise the magazine industry for its failure to lead the public assume that this is the role of magazines: "America can go ahead in thought, in ideals, and in culture, or it can disintegrate

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in its own fat, and it is the mission of magazines to lead the way.”⁵ But there are few editors who can take on this responsibility, and one reason, possibly, is the passing of personal journalism. The editor of a national magazine is just a name on the masthead to most readers. One of the few publications that bears the stamp of its editor’s personality is the *National Review*. Under its outspokenly conservative editor, William F. Buckley, Jr., it carries on a running battle with all left-of-center policies, personalities, and publications. Yet its circulation too is small. It seems that both on the right and on the left the urge to dissent is not very widespread.

One of the best assessments of the role of magazines in the development of American social thought and activities is the final chapter of Theodore Peterson’s book.²⁷ He lays most of the shortcomings of American magazines to their commercial nature; yet this same commercialism permits them to be “an accessible, inexpensive source of entertainment, guidance and instruction . . . [which] made many genuine contributions to American life and culture.”

More than any other medium, perhaps, magazines reflect the patterns of American life. If there is uniformity and conformity in magazines, it is primarily the result of the fact that people have become more homogeneous and complacent. But at the same time, the general quality of magazines has shown an improvement which also reflects the changing patterns of American life, though much more hopefully.

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