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THE BRIGHT, BLEAK FUTURE OF AMERICAN MAGAZINES

On Friday, January 19, 1969, Martin S. Ackerman, who professedly had come to the presidency of the Curtis Publishing Company as savior, announced that the *Saturday Evening Post* would cease publication with its February 8, 1969, issue. The mourners came solemnly to the funeral, and there were obituaries and eulogies galore.

Since countless clinicians have already performed autopsies on Benjamin Franklin's illegitimate offspring, this is not the occasion to speculate in detail about why the magazine died. Yet if one is to assess the future of American magazines, it does seem important to put the death of the *Saturday Evening Post* in perspective, especially since at its death some people heard the ominous tolling of John Donne's churchbell—tolling not just for the *Post* but for all magazines.

Certainly the death of the *Saturday Evening Post* should remind us of the essential mortality of all magazines. Many of the magazines that led in circulation, advertising and prestige preceded the *Post* in death. And in the same month that the *Post* died, *American Builder* slipped quietly into the grave. Eight years earlier, *American Builder* had been its publisher's number one magazine, and only the previous November it had observed its hundredth anniversary. In April, 1969, *Western Farm Life* died at age seventy-one. In April, too, the Hearst Corporation gave up its attempts to sustain *Eye*, a two-year-old monthly for young swingers. Over the years, death has come with democratic impartiality to the young and old, to the poor and to the once wealthy.

But it has come for different reasons. William Emerson, the last editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*, the man who as much as anyone had kept it alive for its last four years, had this to say when his magazine died:

It makes me bitter and angry. This is the end result of misrule. It was not the fault of the editorial product or of the people on the staff. Both were excellent.

This was a business problem. The Post Company is a big, cumbersome, *integrated* publishing organization and in a time of intense competition, this was a handicap. We were the slaves of our own institution.¹

As Emerson said, the Curtis Publishing Company was a big, cumbersome, integrated organization which, indulging its squirrel-like instincts, acquired forests for making paper, mills for converting forests into paper, printing plants and engraving plants and binderies, subscription agencies and distribution facilities. Burdened by enormous fixed costs, it lacked maneuverability.

Curtis could afford to be acquisitive, for in the days before broadcasting it controlled the major national advertising media in the United States. In the 1920s, its publications took in about \$2 of every \$5 that advertisers spent on national advertising in magazines. In 1923, the year that Briton Hadden and Henry Luce started Time Inc., the Curtis magazines accounted for 43 percent of national magazine advertising.

Curtis, however, chose to acquire the wrong things. It could have gone into radio, which its officers evidently regarded as a passing fad, and it could have gone into television. It could have gone into paperback book publishing, for which it had all of the ingredients from manuscripts to distribution facilities; instead it banked on the impregnability of print.

With wealth and power came arrogance. In the lush days, competitors will tell you, Curtis advertising salesmen on their trips from Philadelphia to Chicago to sell space took suites in the best hotels and invited advertisers to come place their orders. And once, when Curtis printers were on strike, others will tell you, the company contracted with Cuneo Press to handle its printing until the dispute was settled. After the strike, Cuneo made a bid for the business. The Curtis treasurer discovered that letting Cuneo do the printing would save the company a million dollars a year, so he took Mr. Cuneo to see Cyrus Curtis, who swiftly disposed of the matter. "Mr. Cuneo," he is supposed to have said, "we are not interested in saving a million dollars a year."

My feeling is that the death of the *Saturday Evening Post* reveals more about the long-term management policies of Curtis than it does about the future of magazine publishing. Even so, William Emerson said of its manner of death, "This has done irreparable harm to the whole publishing industry."¹

Perhaps.

True, *Advertising Age*, a leading trade publication, devoted its October 20, 1969, issue to magazines. Its introduction said:

But now it is magazines . . . which have garnered the attention of the naysayers in the advertising/marketing world. More than anything else, of course, it was the widely reported troubles of the Curtis Publishing Co. and the demise of the *Saturday Evening Post*, once the unquestioned king of advertising media in the United States, which gave impetus to the mournful tolling of the bells.²

Other reasons it mentioned are the widespread acceptance of color television and the influence in advertising agencies of a creative generation which was raised on television.

True, a naysayer bent on looking for them can find a number of at least superficial signs that magazines are in trouble. For instance, A. Kent MacDougall, in one of the perceptive pieces about magazine publishing that he writes for the *Wall Street Journal*,³ noted that Time Inc. had suffered a series of setbacks. His story, which appeared on the eve of the annual meeting of Time Inc. stockholders, reported that *Time* had lost ground to *Newsweek*, although its circulation has continued to rise; that *Life* had lost advertising page volume for nine of the previous twelve years, although its circulation also has continued to grow. Time Inc. had lost heavily on several non-publishing ventures—\$5 million on General Learning Corp., its joint venture with General Electric; \$6 million on its Selling Areas-Marketing Inc., a subsidiary that sells computerized information on the movement of goods from warehouses to supermarkets; \$3 million on a television investment in Venezuela; and \$5.2 million on the market value of its stock in Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. As if to bear out MacDougall, there has been a reshuffling in the higher echelons of Time Inc., and changes have been made in key personnel and in editorial policies of *Time* and *Life*. Yet MacDougall spoke only of temporary setbacks, not imminent death, and it would be premature to predict that a “For Rent” sign will soon appear on the Time-Life Building.

Then there is the *New Yorker*. Recently Douglas Davis came right out in public and said what others had been saying privately: “The *New Yorker* is in trouble. Trouble of a highly qualified, specialized kind, but trouble all the same.”⁴ He reported that its advertising volume was slipping, as were its profits; that among the advertising agencies it was getting the reputation of being “square” and “out-of-date”; that the lively upstart, *New York* magazine, aiming at the eighteen to thirty-four set, was reaching an important audience and filling an editorial need that the *New Yorker* had chosen to ignore. The facts are that the *New Yorker*’s advertising volume in 1968 was 7 percent below that of 1967, and that in the first nine months of this year its page volume was down by 11 percent, its advertising revenues down by 6 percent. I happen to think that the *New Yorker*, like its audience, has become middle-aged and stuffy; but whether or not it actually is in perilous health is quite another matter.

A couple of months ago when *Look* ran an article linking Mayor Joseph Alioto of San Francisco with the Mafia, the mayor charged, among other things, that the magazine is in bad financial trouble. Editor William Arthur went on a twenty-station hookup in California on September 11 to answer some of the charges, specifically to deny that *Look* has lost \$10 million in the past two years and that Standard and Poor’s has said that if *Look* does not turn the profit corner soon, Cowles Communications will be in serious trouble. It is no secret that Cowles Communications has lost money in the past couple of years. But a good deal of that loss has come from the *Suffolk Sun*, a daily newspaper that the company started in Long Island in November 1966. How big a financial drain the paper has been, it is hard to say; some

outsiders have estimated the losses at \$10 million. In any case, the company closed down the newspaper in October 1969, because it saw no prospects for profitable operations in the short term.

What I am trying to suggest by all of this is that one can find gossip, rumor and some hard facts to question the health of magazine publishing. The questioners make a number of points. One is that television has emerged as a major competitor for audience and advertising. Furthermore, a young generation in the advertising agencies has grown up on television, and many of them are more impressed by television than by the printed media when it comes to deciding where to spend their clients' advertising dollars. Another is that magazines have done far too little to bring young people into their audiences. Still another is that in this age of microcards, microfiche, computerized information banks, facsimile, videotape cartridges and other communications marvels, the magazine is obsolescent.

Yet I do not think we have approached the day when libraries should start phasing out their serials departments because magazines are becoming extinct. Magazines will be with us for a long time to come, I think, although not necessarily the same magazines that now crowd our newstands and litter our coffeetables.

Magazine publishing has always been an occupation for gamblers. When Arnold Gingrich and his associates started *Esquire* in 1933, experts quoted them odds of 200 to one against success, and I suspect that the odds have changed little since then. Since the late nineteenth century, magazines have been sensitive to changes in the economy, and they have been especially vulnerable in times of rapidly rising costs because of their curious economics—selling their products to readers at far less than the cost of production and taking their profits from the sale of advertising. Under this system, a large circulation can be either an asset or a terrifying liability. It can be an asset if it attracts a lot of advertising; it can be a liability if it increases faster than advertising rates can be adjusted or if its costs outpace advances in advertising rates. It can be a massive liability if advertising volume drops off.

And a magazine's advertising volume can drop off suddenly. When advertising budgets suffer, as in a recession, so do magazines. An advertiser can cancel his magazine advertising on short notice; he is usually committed for at least thirteen weeks to the advertising he has placed on network television. Moreover, magazine publishing has traditionally been a low-profit industry. Last year, for instance, it is doubtful that the average profit was much more than 3 percent of revenues.

Despite all of this gloomy talk, there are some bright spots. For one thing, magazines at last have learned to live with television, although it took them several years to learn the lesson. At first magazines challenged television in the area of television's greatest strength—audience size. If television could deliver enormous audiences to advertisers, they reasoned, so could magazines, and they charged off after huge circulations at whatever the cost. Now, however, they have begun to exploit their own special strengths, and they are the better for it.

For another thing, the advertising volume of magazines has made respectable advances since the advent of television. True, it is hard to become euphoric over what has happened to advertising page volume. Last year the number of advertising pages—83,406—was only 230 more than in 1957 when television had emerged as a big peril, although the number was a few thousand more than that in 1967, 1966, and 1965. This will be the fifth consecutive year that advertising revenues have exceeded a billion dollars, and they have increased by more than 60 percent since 1957. Last year fifty-seven of the top advertisers spent more money in magazines than they did the previous year. Sears, Roebuck and Company made the biggest increase—\$7,701,000. (Incidentally, if you would like to guess which advertiser spends the most money in *Playboy*, here is your answer—Sears.) There is also some reasonably good evidence that the aggregate circulation of magazines has been growing faster than the population for the past twenty years.

Certainly the birth rate of magazines shows little sign of decreasing. The Magazine Publishers Association has listed more than eighty new magazines that were started in the first nine months of 1969, and the list is surely incomplete. Here are some of them: *Afro-American Woman*, *Apartment Ideas*, *Family Health*, *Government Executive*, *Homemaking with a Flair*, *Jock/New York*, *Mid-Atlantic Living*, *Single*, *Twenty-Five* and *Washington Monthly*. My guess is then that magazines are not being faced with total extinction. They will have to adapt to a new environment to survive, to be sure, but some of them are already showing an awareness of that necessity.

I will mention just a few of the things that have happened and that are likely to happen. One of the most notable developments during the past couple decades has been the steady drift toward the special-interest magazine—the magazine with a sharply-defined audience and a sharply-defined editorial appeal. In recent years, I think the audiences and the editorial appeals have become increasingly narrowed, something that is reflected in the titles of new magazines during that period: *Yankee Trader*, *Amateur Rocketeer*, *Wheels Afield* (about mobile homes and campers), *Scrumdown*, *Catholic Traveler* (with information about shrines and pilgrimages), *Sports-fishing*, *Modern Bridge*, *Bank Equipment News*, *Chess Forum* and *Private Pilot*.

This pin-pointing of audiences has not been confined to magazines. In varying degrees, all of the mass media have been doing it except television, and I strongly suspect that television will head in that same general direction of specialized audiences in the next few years as a result of videotape cartridges, multiple-set homes, community-antenna systems and other things. Since fragmentation of audience seems a characteristic of our times, I think that the future belongs to the special-interest magazines, which in recent years have shown the greatest health and potential.

Another development has been the growth of regional editions. Magazines with national circulations are giving advertisers the chance to buy space in copies distributed only in some restricted area—a marketing zone, a state, a city, a county. In doing so, they have increased their flexibility as an

advertising medium, opened up new sources of potential advertisers, and put themselves in closer competition with the local media. The number of magazines with regional editions has grown from 126 in 1959, to 186 in 1965, to 235 in 1969. These editions have accounted for a growing share of advertising revenues; the \$2 million they brought in last year represented about a 40 percent increase over five years ago.

Since publishers began to exploit regional editions in 1959, the geographic regions have become smaller and smaller. Now several magazines sell space in copies going into such cities as Chicago, Los Angeles and New York. *Farm Journal*, which has published more than 125 different editions of a single issue, will sell circulation in any one of the 3,070 counties in the United States.

Publishers are sorting out their audiences for advertisers not just by geographic area but also by demographics—income, home-ownership, job function, and so on. For instance, in early 1968, *Look* introduced what it calls its Top/Spot edition. Using computers and census data, it discovered the zip code postal zones with the highest median incomes. Now an advertiser can buy space in the copies going only to the 1.1 million affluent readers in those zones instead of, in all of the copies of *Look*. *Esquire* will sell advertisers access to just the half-million of its subscribers living in zip code areas with an average of 70 percent owner-occupied homes. About a year ago *Fortune* began publishing a special edition going to 120,000 computer-selected subscribers who are associated with manufacturing concerns. *Time* has had editions for physicians, educators, and students, and the *Reader's Digest* has had one for pupils in grades seven through twelve and their teachers.

So far most of this experimentation has been for the benefit of the advertiser. But Carroll Streeter of *Farm Journal* has predicted that a decade from now automation might enable his magazine to be tailored to the concerns of individual subscribers. Each subscriber would indicate the subjects he is especially interested in, and they would be programmed. As the magazine moved down the assembly line of the bindery, content matching the special interests of each subscriber would be bound into his individualized copy. Printing technology is not yet sophisticated enough for this sort of thing; in a decade perhaps it might be.

In the 1970s I would not be surprised if two other things did become fairly common. One is free distribution of some consumer magazines to carefully chosen lists of readers. For years, trade and technical magazines have practiced free distribution under the euphemism "controlled circulation." Recently a few new consumer magazines have tried it without notable success, but they have been essentially coupon-books for housewives, and I doubt that they were a fair test. Another is a break with traditional publishing schedules. Nothing in the nature of magazines requires that they appear weekly or fortnightly or monthly; that frequency is simply a convention. I would not be surprised if magazines, abandoning that convention, came to adjust their appearances to the patterns of living of their audiences and to the marketing patterns of their advertisers rather than to some rigid schedule.

To me one of the biggest changes in magazines has been in content. I believe that in the past half-dozen years magazine content has become more sophisticated in approach, has tackled more significant problems and issues, and has been blessed with more experimentation than at any time in the forty years I have been reading periodicals. Let us grant that magazines were too slow in taking up such subjects as civil rights, poverty and the Vietnam War. They have taken them up, and they have covered them from every imaginable angle. My generalization does not apply to every magazine, of course, but it does apply to some of several types—mass-circulation magazines, religious magazines, trade and technical magazines, among others.

Just as significantly, magazines have begun to experiment with reporting techniques. They have been the fount of the so-called "new journalism," which at its best brings the vision of the artist upon people, conditions and events and which uses the devices of literature to report actual happenings.

Television was, I believe, an important force in improving magazine content. On the one hand, television is the entertainment medium par excellence; on the other hand, it has made people aware of things that had not previously concerned them. Magazines began to leave outright amusement to television and to explore the widening range of interests that television helped to make possible.

The new forms of communication—computerized information banks, video-tape cartridges and all the rest—will probably have a similar influence on magazine content. In order to survive, magazines will turn to the tasks that they can do more effectively and efficiently than other forms of communication—reporting and assessing underlying social conditions, for instance, and perhaps providing a refuge for the browser.

Those that can adapt will survive, I think, and we are joined to both their past and their future. Let me elaborate on that cryptic sentence. If librarians want to rank alongside Albert Schweitzer and Jonas Salk as great humanitarians, they can earn that seat of glory by keeping a balanced, representative collection of magazines as the documents of our age. Magazines can tell us a great deal about the world we live in, the goals we seek, the values we cherish. They are a good primary source for the historian concerned with American civilization and for the scholar interested in popular culture. And if we are unaware of the zealotry with which scholars have been putting popular culture up for examination in the past decade or so, we are missing out on one of the phenomena of the times.

Let me give a couple quick illustrations of the value of magazines. It is quite well accepted now that the true confession magazines provide their readers with guides to daily living. As middle-class housewives turn to factual articles in *McCall's* and *Ladies' Home Journal* for ideas about child rearing or advice on coping with family problems, some blue-collar housewives turn to the narratives in *True Story* and *True Confessions*. In the experiences of others, they hope to find answers to some of the questions that perplex them. What sort of help do they get? What rules of conduct are implicitly prescribed by the confession magazines? What values do they prize? How have all of

those things changed over the years? To answer questions of that sort, one obviously needs access to a good file of confession magazines. Take another type of question. How have the mass-circulation magazines portrayed the Negro over the years? Did their portrayal reflect an unthinking racism that may have perpetuated the status quo? Is it true that the Negro magazines themselves subtly enforced the status quo? Again, the answers lie in the right collection of magazines. Magazines are sources of factual material as well. In the days of silent movies, for instance, *Photoplay*, a movie fan magazine, carried a good deal of significant information about the motion picture industry that is not available anywhere else.

I had always naively assumed that in those gloomy library stacks the files of magazines were there. I had assumed that if one wanted a copy of *Photoplay* for March 1923, or *True Story* for April 1927, or *True Detective* for May 1929, or *Confidential* for June 1958, a library would be a more likely place to look than someone's attic. Then a few years ago I discovered how very wrong I was. I was thinking about writing a book about the wonderful world of the pulp magazines of the 1920s and 1930s and the fascinating characters who populated it. When I started looking for runs of *Black Mask*, *Dime Detective*, *Blue Book*, *Argosy*, *Spicy Western*, *Rangeland Love*, *Battle Aces* and some of their fellows, I was astonished to discover that virtually no libraries have them. Of the enormous outpouring of pulp magazines that sustained Max Brand and other writers at a penny a word, only a tiny fraction, alas, has survived. I was even more astonished three years ago to discover that only two libraries in the United States profess to have complete runs of *Playboy* and only four more to have any bound volumes at all—this even though *Playboy*, whatever one may think of it, has been a remarkable reflection of and significant influence on the change in manners and morals of the past decade.

So I did some rudimentary checking on other magazines that have illuminated various aspects of life and culture in the U.S. over the past half-century or so. I was surprised to find how rarely some of them turn up on library shelves. Some, in fact, seem available only from the Library of Congress; a few evidently are not even available there. Among them were *Down Beat*, which has covered the jazz scene since 1934; *Amazing Stories*, which was started in 1926 as one of the first science fiction magazines; *Hot Rod*, which came along in 1948 to capitalize on and stimulate the craze for souped-up automobiles; *Ballyhoo*, which was started in 1931 as a fortnightly of broad satire and which ran up a newstand sale of two million, an incredible record for the time; *Mad*, which is a contemporary version of *Ballyhoo*; *Abbott's Monthly*, which had a short life as a pioneer magazine for Negroes; *Fate*, which for the past twenty years has served readers interested in reincarnation, predictive dreams, extrasensory perception, and other aspects of the occult; *Black Mask*, which H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan started in 1920 to run manuscripts they could not publish in *Smart Set*; *Saucy Stories*, which was also a product of Mencken and Nathan; *Salute*, which was addressed to World War II veterans and which drew on *Yank*, the army weekly, for some of its talent; *College Humor*, which in the 1920s and 1930s

portrayed a John Held Jr., version of college life; *Dude, Gent* and *Nugget*, which were all imitators of *Playboy*; and *Capt. Billy's Whiz Bang*, which was a monthly of smoking-car humor that became the foundation of today's Fawcett Publications.

Altogether I listed a hundred magazines under such headings as confession magazines; fact detective magazines; pulps; hobbies and leisure; humor and satire; action-adventure; and sex, shock and sensation. Selfishly, I am concerned that runs of some of them—*Dime Western*, *Fifteen Range Romances*, and *Detective Story* for instance—are mouldering in publishers' warehouses in Brooklyn, if indeed they are not already beyond recall. I urged University Microfilms of Ann Arbor to start microfilming the hundred titles as an American Civilization/Popular Culture series, and I recently heard that the project was getting under way.

Most of those magazines are seldom found in libraries, and I think that I know the reasons, excluding budget limitations. One reason is that librarians are not specialists in magazines. Given their other duties, they can scarcely be blamed for not keeping track of all the new magazines that pop up. Even if they had a budget as large as President Nixon's investment in real estate, they would find it impractical to subscribe to a magazine until it has demonstrated its worth and staying power. One test of whether or not libraries subscribe to a magazine, I suspect, is whether or not it is listed in the right indexes. And one test of whether or not a magazine is listed in the right indexes, I further suspect, is whether or not libraries subscribe to it. *Esquire*, as I recall, was a long time in earning beatification by the indexes. *Playboy*, which nowadays is quoted by the clergy almost as often as Genesis, still has not made the indexes.

That leads to another reason. Librarians are eminently respectable; many of the magazines that tell us a great deal about our century do not seem to be respectable. *Night and Day*, *Dude*, *Clyde*, *Eros*, *Sir*, *Modern Romances*, *Dime Western*, *Doc Savage*—they seem shabby companions to share library shelves with such upright citizens of the magazine world as the *National Geographic* and *Reader's Digest*.

Moreover, people, librarians included, form mental images of some magazines without bothering to read them. Those images, whether or not they have a basis in reality, linger on in perpetuity. I still encounter people who think of *Esquire*—which is surely one of the best magazines in the U.S.—as something to be read furtively in barbershops. I still encounter people who think of *Playboy* as the greatest threat to the moral fiber of the nation since the abolition of the 72-hour work week.

Serial librarians have the beneficent task of selecting the magazines that best disseminate current knowledge and of preserving some of the most representative aspects of our subcultures. Their task is already a big one, and I am afraid that it will not get easier. If my guess is right, magazines will be around for some time, and the gamblers among us will be bringing out new ones at no less a rate than in the recent past. From the fifty or sixty or eighty new magazines that appear each year, which ones should the serial librarian choose for their current use and value? Which ones to represent these

times to a later generation? And as I have said, magazines have been becoming more and more specialized. As they continue to restrict their editorial appeal, I should imagine that the serial librarian will find it increasingly difficult to decide on which ones to spend his not-unlimited funds to get the most effective representation. Should he have *Girl Talk*? *Vertical World*? *Gap*, which seeks to bridge the generation you-know-what? *Flying Yankee*? *Fund Raising Management*? *Gambling Illustrated*? *Weight Watchers*?

And so we end, not with a band, but with a question.

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