

Letter from America

Magazine Heaven has gone to Hell

After 40 years on American magazines, I mourn the golden days



EDWARD KOSNER

In my imagination, there's a celestial realm called Magazine Heaven. No cerulean skies and puffy white cumulus – just clouds of cigarette smoke, old typewriters, desks that look like unmade beds and raffish souls having the time of their former lives.

There's Henry Luce and Briton Haddon cobbling together the first issue of *Time*. There's the *New Yorker's* William Shawn worrying a comma in a J D Salinger story, and Frank Crowninshield and the beautiful young Clare Boothe (later Luce) putting out the original *Vanity Fair*. In his silk pyjamas, Hugh Hefner is picking the centrefold for *Playboy*. Over by the grimy window, Margaret Bourke-White and Alfred Eisenstaedt are fiddling with their lenses before going out on assignment for *Life*.

I conjure Magazine Heaven often these days. I don't presume ever to ascend there – although I toiled in magazines for nearly four decades. For much of that time, I was the editor, first of *Newsweek* (founded in the 1930s to compete with *Time*), then of *New York* (created in the 1960s by the brilliant Clay Felker) and *Esquire* (where Harold Hayes worked his magic in the '60s and '70s). No, I think about the golden age of American magazines because the very survival of many of them now seems so fragile.

The fraught state of these slick periodicals is of a piece with the plight of the print press in general. Essentially national newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* thrived in the Age of Trump because he reliably produced a headlined outrage nearly every day he was in office.

Advertising and news-stand sales are nothing like they what used to be, but these papers are harvesting ever more digital subscriptions from readers who crave reliable information; this saves their publishers the trouble and expense of actually putting an inky wad of newsprint in people's hands each day.



But once-great newspapers across the United States, particularly in smaller cities, have been retrenching for years. They've cut editions, furloughed and culled staff, especially veterans with news savvy. They've shuttered newsrooms – nearly empty these past months anyway, with staff working remotely because of the pandemic.

The magazine story is equally depressing. The successor to Luce's original Time Inc sold off its fabled titles – *Time* magazine itself, *Fortune*, *Sports Illustrated* and more – to competitors and individual entrepreneurs. With their new owners, many of these magazines are melting like ice cubes on a hot stove.

My alma mater, *Newsweek*, has suffered even more. Once selling more than three million copies a week and plump with ads, the faltering magazine was handed off for a single dollar (and subscription liabilities) by Katharine Graham's family company a decade ago. Its new multi-millionaire owner promptly died, and *Newsweek* underwent a marriage of convenience with Tina Brown's *Daily Beast* website.

That didn't work either, and the husk of this once great news magazine is being put out by a fourth owner. It's now a website with a print component less than five per cent of its peak circulation.

The once-luxuriant women's fashion magazines can look peaked, too. Their September issues – especially *Vogue's* – were crammed with advertising. They could be so hefty that readers risked pulling a delicate muscle picking them up. Not much danger of that any more.

But the diminution goes beyond the commercial – it's the influence that these publications once brandished that is an equal casualty of the age. *Time* magazine's choice of its Man of the Year (in 2006, bowing to political correctness, the title morphed into Person of the Year) was once a big story. Just making the cover of any week's *Time* or *Newsweek* was a real distinction in itself.

The twinned advent of cable TV news and the internet robbed the print press of ads and eyeballs. The news magazines were decimated. Their readers, especially in the heartland, were people who prided themselves on keeping up with the latest in politics, world affairs, science and culture. An hour or so spent with *Newsweek* or *Time* made them feel au courant. Now, these people get it all – unmediated – on their screens.

Still, like the big three national newspapers, some topical periodicals thrive on. The *New Yorker*, thinner now than in the flush '50s, has held and even expanded its audience and sway. And the American edition of the UK's *Economist*, recently redesigned, looks like another winner in the race for survival.

The encouraging lesson here is that readers will support newspapers and magazines that offer those most valuable of modern media commodities: accurate information and trustworthy analysis presented with confident verve. *Time* and *Newsweek* and some others may be overdue in Magazine Heaven but, as the *Oldie's* 400th issue shows, there's still life for smart magazines here on earth.

Edward Kosner is the author of *It's News to Me*, a memoir of his journalism career