

**Book Review: The Great Past but Murky Future of Magazines**

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**The Magazine Century: American Magazines Since 1900.** David E. Sumner. New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 2010, 242 pp. paperback.

David E. Sumner's *The Magazine Century* is a lucid, well-researched view of the development of the American magazine industry from 1900 to the present, with a glance beyond our own times. It is a worthy historical document and a breezy read. The itinerary is bold, but Sumner is an amiable tour guide who illustrates the route with sketches of the publishers and the magazines that marked the times. We travel with him from the bumpy cobblestone lanes of *Munsey's*, *McClure's*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*, when the modern American magazine format and business model took shape, to the rapidly receding shores where *Martha Stewart Living*, *EveryDay with Rachael Ray*, *Real Simple*, and *Wired*.

To separate his book from others about the magazine business, Sumner shines his high beams on the picturesque innovators and innovations rather than the products. The innovations are well known. The innovators are less well known, especially outside the industry and academe. Sumner does a yeoman's job of animating many who took big risks to express a personal vision to create the most popular mass medium and the best advertising vehicle in the U.S. Magazines are also a narcissistic product of what German philosopher Theodor Adorno called "the culture industry," who reminds us that magazines are "not made to meet human needs and desires, but for the sake of profit."

The facts and figures are here, but we don't quite get inside the skin of the personalities in the rogues gallery of ramblers, copycats, rascals, and gamblers. I missed getting some of the more salacious bits, such as how Moe Annenberg muscled circulation moxie into philanthropy, the reputed mob money that fueled the *National Enquirer*, how the rapscallion Richard Fox finagled the ownership of *The National Police Gazette*, or the backroom antics of the lecherous Colonel Mann and his fin-de-siècle *Smart Set*.

Sumner gives us a taste of Malcolm Forbes but not of his hot-air ballooning, fabulous Fabergé jeweled egg collection, and ultra-extravagant Moroccan 70th birthday party where his pal Elizabeth Taylor, the Kardashian of her day, was an honored guest. We get a scoop of the smarmy H.L. Mencken, with his *Smart Set* and pulpy *Black Mask* spinoff, the man who's said to have opined that no one ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American public...a view that has, so far, proved prescient. I would have wished Sumner's travels to

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include short stops with *schlockmeisters* like Harry Steeger and the Spicys' Donenfield and Armer (printers who became publishers by default). We get Newhouse and Hearst but not Bernie Goldhirsh, George Hirsch, John Fairchild, or Steven Brill.

Launching a magazine takes nerves of steel and iron...and a little bit of larceny in the soul. Just ask Tina Brown, who said, "Starting a magazine is an intensely complicated business with so many factors in play. You have to be the right person in the right time with the right ideas." Right now, Brown is trying to get her arms around an unruly meld of *Newsweek* and her daily Internet aggregation, *The Daily Beast*, in the hopes of infusing the convergent hybrid with the "great kind of high-low, newsy, sexy thing that the European newsmagazines have," as she told *The New York Times Magazine*.

British magazine publisher David Hepworth once said that when it comes to launching a new magazine, nobody knows anything. I know about that. I've been in the office when the sheriffs came to impound the office furniture of an ambitious but undercapitalized young publisher who went bankrupt but lived to publish another day. *Penthouse* publisher Bob Guccione told me how he hid behind a couch when police and printer came knocking at his UK door to collect on a kited check or cart him off on pornography charges. I've had my share and more of heated arguments with printers and color separators at 2 a.m. press checks.

These are the kinds of war stories that make students salivate.

Sumner is an optimist and provides the statistics to support Compaine's expansion of interests theory, which he favors. Although the media cosmos is expanding, time is not, and I've begun to question his view of the future and relevance of the form in these days of aggregators, curators, and coders instead of editors and art directors. Lately, I find myself thinking about the purpose of a magazine in today's media environment. Stacks of them are collecting dust in my apartment. Do I need a storehouse to fill up a storage room? Am I hoping for a shot at humiliation stardom on "The Hoarders"? Don't get me wrong. I have an affection for magazines that dates back to my childhood, when a new issue of *Classics Illustrated* was a treasured gift from my dad. I'm not so sure anyone wants a magazine anymore. The screen doesn't smell like the page, but the Nook glows in the dark.

Sumner is a serious man, but is what he is teaching, indeed, is what we are all teaching, akin to a dead language? Are we relics of the Dark Ages of Media? On a balmy night in Florida not long ago, a friend and mentor asked me what kind of a magazine I would make if I could. Frankly, I was stumped. I'm still stumped. I'm reminded of a bit of banter between Groucho and Chico in the Marx brothers' 1929 movie *The Cocoanuts*.

Chico: *Why a duck? Why a no chicken?*

Groucho: *Well, I don't know why a no chicken; I'm a stranger here myself.*

Why a magazine?