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THE FUNCTION OF A MAGAZINE IN AMERICA

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The Function of a Magazine In America

By Frederick L. Allen

I SHOULD like to discuss with you a subject which, explicitly or implicitly, is a matter of almost continuous debate in the office in which I work: the proper function of a magazine in America, and more particularly of an independent magazine such as we try to produce. There are all manner of magazines in this country, ranging from the slicks and the digests to the news weeklies and the organs of opinion to the confession magazines and the pulps to the comics. They have all manner of aims. We at *Harper's* limit ourselves to certain special functions; partly, of course, unconsciously, on the basis of our personal tastes; partly consciously, because we enjoy the effort to exercise these functions and also because we believe they are necessary and useful. We believe that our nation and our culture would be the poorer if at least some magazines did not at least make a try at exercising them.

These functions might be defined somewhat as follows:

1. *The magazine must be interesting*—interesting enough, at least, to hold its subscribers and newsstand buyers and find new ones. That is a sort of preliminary objective, a sine qua non, for the magazine must be able to pay its bills and live in a commercial world. Nor is this an unhealthy objective. The commercial test—the necessity of operating at a profit—provides a stimulus without which many a subsidized journal desiccates. It necessitates in the editors a healthy respect for their readers.

In the case of *Harper's Magazine* we have a special interpretation of this objective. We make no effort to produce material aimed at the millions of people who, whatever their merits, either do not really know how to read or do not care to make the effort, who are not interested in the realities of the present-day world, and who are not interested in distinction of thought and expression. We deliberately edit for a minority of educated—though not necessarily formally educated—people, intelligent people, responsible people, whom our promotion department, not without reason, refers to as the real leaders of America. At present our circulation, limited by paper

rationing, is about 110,000. We see no reason why, under more normal conditions, it should not be expanded; but we intend to limit ourselves to the people we can attract without abandoning other objectives which are not merely preliminary.

2. *The monthly magazine, we believe, should provide news, in the widest sense*—more selective, more considered, and more concentratedly illuminating than the newspaper or even the news weekly can provide; far more timely than books ordinarily can offer.

3. *It should provide interpretation and discussion of the important issues before the public*—more thorough than a newspaper can provide, but less demanding of sustained, specialized interest than a book. This discussion should be honest, searching, independent, and aimed at serving the general public interest; no special pleading, no pressure-group stuff, no axe-grinding, no kowtowing to any private interest or power, no evasion of the uncomfortable fact. It should be just as far-sighted as possible. And it should try to make, now and then, at least an approach to wisdom.

4. *The magazine should provide a platform for original and inventive thinkers,* for voices crying in the wilderness, for really creative ideas wherever they may be found. We live today in an all-too-organized world of mighty governments, corporations, institutions, associations, parties, and blocs, each with its own policy, its own special interests, its own publicity machine; wearing its own blinders to all that does not serve its own special ends. The unorganized individual has too few platforms from which to speak his mind. It seems to us to be one of the functions of a monthly magazine to offer him a platform to the limit of our space and our attention to our other objectivities. This is one reason why we scan diligently the manuscripts which flood into our office at the rate of fifty a day. We are looking for the seminal idea, the objective judgment on the trend of things, the air-clearing outburst of indignation, the long-awaited satirical indictment, the shout of profane laughter, which will suddenly throw everything about us into a new perspective—and which is as likely as not to come from some individual who sits all by himself, unorganized, unrecognized, unorthodox, and unterrified.

5. *Likewise the magazine should provide a vehicle for artists in literature*—in fiction, in poetry, in the essay, in whatever form he may invent within the limits of space available. Does that term "artists in literature" sound, perhaps, a little bloodless, a little—forgive me if I use the word disrespectfully within these precincts—a little academic? Then let me add that it is not intended to offer shelter for the finicky products of the ivory tower, for the feeble traditionalism that passes for distinction in some university cloisters, or for the dullness that sometimes masquerades in the minds of its producers as intellectuality too exalted in quality for "merely commercial" magazines. It is intended to cover only the excitingly creative, the lustily energetic, the freshly amusing, the newly beautiful, the illuminat-

ing, the profound—if, indeed, any magazine can be so lucky as once in a long while to discover the profound.

Those five aims—one merely preliminary, the others positive—seem to us worth while, for our own magazine and for others too.

I might add, on behalf of our own particular magazine, that we are often asked what is our formula. How long should an article be? What sort of story do we prefer? Comic, tragic, adventure, character, American setting, foreign setting, or what? Such questions puzzle us. Their implication would seem to be that we edit by a rule-book. How long should an article be? Long enough to cover the subject succinctly and as thoroughly as it requires—which may be three hundred words or ten thousand according to the subject—and to leave us room for enough other things to provide variety in any given issue of 96 pages. What sort of story do we prefer? Stories we enjoy and would feel proud to publish. What sort of articles do we prefer? Articles that seem to us interesting, new, mature, and valuable —and, of course, that don't overlap too much what we've already accepted or arranged for, and that will enable us to provide a well-varied menu. In so far as we have a formula, I suppose I have been stating it during the past few minutes. I prefer to think of it as a series of general aims which may be groped for in all sorts of ways.

I SAY "groped for" because the list of aims that I have given you is obviously unattainably high. No group of editors could be knowledgeable enough in all direction, sure enough in perception, far-sighted enough in planning, to come anywhere near achieving them—even if the manuscripts which came in to them had the qualities which I have been describing, and the authors who carried out the planned editorial projects always produced just what was required—which they don't. We make our own stab at these aims partly by spending at least half our time scanning the incoming manuscripts—and debating furiously over their merits and demerits; partly by seizing upon some manuscript that seems to us to contain a valuable idea or valuable factual material and revising or rewriting it (with the author's permission) until it satisfies both him and us; partly by exercising what judgment we can bring to bear upon ideas presented to us in advance, either in conversation or in written outline; and partly by deciding what subject we simply must deal with, seeing if we can find the right person to deal with it, and setting him to work upon it—and then, perhaps, putting his completed work through that process of editing and rewriting that I have just mentioned. We are sometimes asked how much of the material in a given issue comes to us from the outside and how much we originate; that's like being asked, "Is a rainbow mostly purple or mostly red?" The answer is, "A little purple, a little red, and a lot of colors in between." But the point that I am trying to make here is that any editors worth their salt must be dogged by a sense of inadequacy.

Here is an article by a refugee professor on the future of Eastern Europe: how can we be sure whether or not he knows his stuff? Whether he's grinding some axe that we don't recognize? The next article may be on hormones, or the CIO, or Teachers' College, or President Truman, or military tactics—and we ought to be able to judge whether the facts set forth in it are new and important. Here is a story which some readers might regard as subtly distinguished and others might regard as merely null and void—which judgment of it is right? Here is a piece of modern verse—is it cryptically original or just perversely tricky? Here is an article that seems to go sour along about page 12—what sort of cutting or rewriting is needed? Here is a subject that seems to us to call for an article— say, the postwar prospects for American higher education; who can deal with it clearly, soundly, freshly, and with real knowledge? On any one of these things one may come a miserable cropper; on some of them one is bound to.

BUT there are other difficulties in the way of realizing the ideal aims of a magazine, difficulties which would beset even an editorial board of supermen. I am not referring to the temporary difficulties of wartime—the shortage of young free-lance journalists of ability (for most of them are in the armed forces or government service); the difficulty of getting access to important facts in a time when much that one would like to print is secret; the tiresome business of getting credentials for correspondents and getting articles cleared through censorship; and the mechanical difficulties of living inside one's paper rationing and getting the magazine even halfway acceptably printed, and delivered somewhere near on time, in the face of a manpower shortage which cripples the printers and the delivery services. Rather I am referring to the long range difficulties which must be faced by anyone who wants to do a thorough, independent, and useful job in magazine journalism.

1. The first—and best-known—of these difficulties is the danger of stifling or perversion of the magazine's function by the commercial pressure of advertisers. Even if a magazine is friendly toward enlightened business, and glad to have its advertising, and is in favor of free enterprise, as we are, it now and again feels this pressure; for it can hardly maintain its objectivity and its broad national point of view without sometimes taking issue with the policies of commercial organizations or the performance of specific corporations. In my own experience, I should say that the pressure is seldom exercised directly and melodramatically. I have been told that there are some commercial interests which bear down callously and with some precision on some types of magazines, saying in effect—to a fashion magazine, for example—"You print a page of come-on stuff about our product in your text or you won't get our advertising." Perhaps we at *Harper's* look too virtuous to be acceptable candidates for that sort of prostitution—or not sufficiently attractive. I can't even recall a case in which any advertiser

has been naive enough to say to us, "You printed such-and-such an article and therefore we withdraw our advertising," though one or two have come close to it.

No, the pressure is subtler than that; and to realize its nature you must bear in mind that in advertising transactions it is the magazine which is the seller—of space; it is the magazine which is trying to ingratiate itself with national advertisers and with the advertising agencies, in competition with many other magazines. No advertiser need be so crude as to withdraw his advertising for cause; he need only wait till the advertising salesman comes round to renew the contract, and then either tell him blandly that the program is going to be a little different next year, or else—often with genuine moral heat—inform him that he prefers to deal with magazines which are friendly and constructively American, and not with Reds who stab their clients or prospective clients in the back and then have the cheek to come round and solicit their business. Under the circumstances the way of financial success is likely to seem all too clear. The editor will say to himself, "You want the magazine to make money, don't you? You want all the advertising you can get, don't you? Well, don't go round insulting the people whose favor you need. Flatter them. Eliminate anything disrespectful to them. Play ball with them." That's how the pressure works. And if you would realize its full strength, remember that the advertiser is not a sword-and-dagger villain but is likely to be a good fellow who really believes his stuff—really believes that his corporation is one of the bulwarks of America and that anyone who calls it a monopoly is tearing down the structure of America—and that he can be mighty persuasive about it.

The managements of many magazines yield so cheerfully to this pressure that they hardly feel it; they sail cheerfully before the winds of commerce. A few over-compensate against it—in their eagerness to withstand it they become crusaders who belabor business one-sidedly, unfairly, and abusively. Indeed, so general in American journalism has been deference to the interests of advertisers that a great many uncompromisingly honest journalists have felt that their honor required them to malign business on all occasions. It is not easy to pursue a genuinely independent course in the face of this pressure.

Let me give you an example. Last year we accepted an article on a certain industry and its shortcomings—an article which, in its original form, an experienced member of our staff said might cost us $25,000 in advertising in the course of a few years. We thought that, in some respects, it was unfair as written. We went through it carefully, scanning every adjective which might give offence unfairly, making sure that the subjects of the article were given all the credit we thought they deserved for good jobs done. We did this partly out of commercial prudence, partly out of a desire to be even-handedly just and not over-compensate, and partly because

we thought the article would be more effective if it could not be too readily dismissed as a "smear." But we printed it. For we said to ourselves, "We are not sure that there is another magazine in the country with anywhere near our influence that would print this piece, and we would be ashamed to live in a United States in which an article so challenging and potentially useful could not find print." That the article did have an effect—I think a highly salutary effect—was obvious; I could give you chapter and verse if I wished to advertise our apprehensions by telling you what article I am talking about. (I'd rather not, out of sheer commercial prudence!) Whether we shall lose that $25,000 I don't know; so far it doesn't look as if we would.

This, and other somewhat similar experiences, leads me to hope that if one is scrupulously fair, if one doesn't throw about accusations as to personal motives, as if one saves one's fire for attacks which one is convinced are well deserved, one may be able to maintain a magazine's independence and also its prosperity. But the collective indirect pressure of corporations on magazine policy can be great—and might easily become greater after the war. Most of the men who run these big corporations respect independence, I think; but it is not easy to respect it when it attacks one's own work, and so the danger is forever with us. That is one reason why a magazine whose revenue comes largely from its circulation finds its objectivity of judgment less inhibited than one which has all its biggest eggs in the advertising basket.

2. The second difficulty which besets an independent magazine is government pressure. This too is indirect and subtle, and for the most part it is merely potential—something to keep an eye out for. Let me say at once that the government's policy in wartime paper-rationing has been scrupulously fair; all magazines are cut alike, regardless of their party line, their size, their seriousness, or their frivolity. Let me say too that never have the people in any government bureau which was a subject of attack in our magazine set the Income Tax Bureau on our trail. (That, of course, is what would happen in a tyranny: if you said harsh words about Secretary X or Senator Y, the income tax boys would at once move in on you and decide that you had made some errors in your return.) Let me add further that the American wartime policy of voluntary censorship—which places no censors in our office but relies on our patriotic honor to submit to censorship anything which may be censorable and anything written by a correspondent attached to the armed forces—is a policy to be proud of.

In our experience the Office of Censorship has done a job of first-class wisdom and restraint. The Navy Department, since 1942 (When the brass hats were afraid to let anything be told lest the enemy find out about our weaknesses), has done well, though some of the rules laid down as to what may be released and what may not reflect a curious arbitrariness at the top, in the face of which the Public Relations officers do the best they can and do it efficiently. The War Department likewise has done its censoring con-

scientiously, though its organization in security matters is so complex that sometimes it is fumbling and slow.

I remember a War Department reviewing officer saying early in the war, "When we get an article about ordnance to review, we send it first to the ordnance department, and some overworked colonel who knows the technical stuff reads it. If the article says we have only 45 anti-aircraft guns on the Atlantic Seaboard the colonel cuts that out, and rightly—that's information of value to the enemy. But if it says that the author knows all the generals in the ordnance department and none of them has the brains of a flea, the colonel cuts that out too, because naturally he's outraged. It's my job to OK the deletion about the guns and restore the deletion about the generals—because that's a matter of opinion, and the author has a right to say it." Not all the reviewing done in the War Department has lived up to that admirable definition. Sometimes the overworked colonels, in their ignorance of journalistic freedom, do odd things. One officer—not connected with the Public Relations Bureau—once suggested to one of our authors that we might get clearance for an article which was being held up a long time by the censors if we incorporated flattering mention of certain high officers—a naive suggestion to which we reacted with such obvious shock that everybody hastened to explain that the man must have been joking.

There was only one occasion in which we took really indignant issue with a censorship decision in the War Department, and in that case it was not the censorship decision so much as an incidental implication of it that really roused us. A year ago an article containing criticism of General MacArthur was denied publication on grounds of military security. We were told by letter, when the manuscript came back to us, that it would be bad for the morale of the armed forces in the Southwest Pacific and therefore would be of service to the Axis. Whereupon we ran an editorial saying that a critical article on General MacArthur had been denied publication, and arguing that although there might be situations in which criticism of a general should not be permitted to see print, and editors might not always be the best judges of what those situations were, certainly no man who occupied such a situation had any right to be running for the Presidency of the United States against men who were constantly subject to criticism. Three days after that editorial reached Washington, General MacArthur withdrew his candidacy. There may have been some connection—I think there was. But, as I said before, in that case our objection was only partly to the act of censorship; it was chiefly to the accidental political implications. On the whole a difficult function has been pretty well performed by the War Department's Public Relations officers.

Why then do I speak of government pressure as a potential difficulty? Because there is always potential embarrassment in dealing with a wielder of great power. The War and Navy Departments issue credentials and travel

orders to correspondents, extend them hospitality and assistance on their missions, and then review their work afterward. Is a correspondent unduly sensitive to feel in his bones that if he praises the job being done and the men who do it, his flying orders may come through a little more readily, his next story may be easier to get, the censors may be quicker, and things may in general go more smoothly? That inept suggestion that I cited a moment ago, to the effect that an article which flattered certain officers might be cleared more readily, had a lot of human nature in it. Will the time ever come when a magazine which criticizes the State Department will find that its correspondent cannot, unaccountably, get a passport? Or when a magazine which criticizes the postal censorship will find itself in trouble with its second-class mail privileges? Or when a magazine which criticizes the administration, or the party in power generally, may find its way oddly difficult in all these respects or others? Let us hope that that time will never come. But the price of liberty will be what it always has been.

Here again it is possible to over-compensate. One's unceasing vigilance may turn into general biliousness. Especially in wartime—when one's duty is to do everything possible to help the armed forces and the war effort generally, when one believes overwhelmingly in the general purpose and mission of the nation—one finds it hard to decide when to go along enthusiastically with the governing powers and when to object. Here again the path of true independence is a narrow one.

3. The third and last source of danger to a magazine's independence might be described as pressure from the readers. Perhaps it might better be described as pressure from the editor's own zeal for more circulation than their standards of thoroughness or of honesty or of impartiality will permit without compromise. There are a great many readers—people who might become readers—who want the soothing, the specious, the innocuous, the easy; and smart editors with just the right gift for reaching the popular mind can make thumping successes by diligently pleasing these people.

"Your articles are too long," someone says. "The *Reader's Digest* is all I have time for." To which the only answer I know is, "But the *Reader's Digest* is doing, with remarkable skill, a different job from ours. They cannot deal with a very complex problem without oversimplifying it—they just haven't the space. So they deal with very few complex problems—and some of these problems are important. We're trying to give you the whole story. We do our damnedest to make it interesting, but we won't skimp it. For that's our job as we see it."

"You run too much about the war," says somebody else. "I'm tired of reading about it. Won't you give us something *interesting?*" To which we reply, in effect, "Listen, this war is important. To turn the focus of public attention away from it would be scandalously irresponsible. We try to give you plenty of variety, to give you, in much of what we print, the

respite you need from the main job at hand; we all need relaxation from the war effort. But we'll give you the war too, plenty of it, and no apologies."

We get protests from pressure groups of all sorts—business, political, religious—charging us with being parties to conspiracies to undermine the foundations of this and that; some of these protests reveal that their authors are utterly unable to imagine such a thing as an independent opinion.

Let me give you a trivial but characteristic example. The latest of these protests, noting that John Chamberlain, in our book-review column, had said that W. L. White's book on Russia was "not an anti-Russian book," expressed dismay at our anti-Russianness; said that "surely there could be no connection—or is there?"—between the fact that Mr. Chamberlain said what he did about Mr. White's book and the fact that there was a large advertisement of the book on the opposite page; noted also that Mr. White was an editor of the *Reader's Digest* and just possibly we had a contract with the *Reader's Digest,* and expressed the final hope that we hadn't "joined the anti-Russian crusade of our native fascists." The answer to all that, of course, is that Mr. Chamberlain reviews what he pleases and we give him a free hand and don't delete his negatives; that it is only good make-up, such as you will find in any well-run periodical, to put advertisements where they will be likely to catch the eye of the reader at the moment when he may be interested; that although we have a contract with the *Reader's Digest,* this does not compel us to flatter anybody connected with the *Digest,* nor would the *Digest* expect it to; and finally that various versions of Russia appear in our pages—that, for example, there is now on the press an article much more favorable to Russia than the book that Mr. Chamberlain referred to.

I cite that protest as a very minor example of the inability of many well-meaning people to comprehend a periodical having a mind of its own or offering space to contributors with minds of their own. We at *Harper's* are called, from time to time, communists, fascists, New Dealers, reactionaries; brutally savage toward the nation's enemies, pacifistically tender toward the nation's enemies; anti-Russian, anti-British; victims of the conspiratorial propaganda of the Russians, of the British; anti-business, anti-labor, anti-farmer, or the tools of each. Sometimes the thought occurs to us that we are really idiots not to recognize that a magazine is just a commodity, and that we could probably sell more copies if we made everything short, easy, inoffensive, and trivial; or else just adopted a party line of some sort and made everything comfortably one-sided. One of the things that sustains us is the realization that we would make a botch of any such effort; we are doing the only thing we know how to do.

Is there a real threat that the seduction of readers by soothing sentiment —the journalism of the innocuous—or by what amuses them effortlessly—

pictures, snippets of text, comic strips—or by rigidly partisan journalism—each periodical sticking angrily to its line—will reach a point where there will not be enough readers left to support magazines that try to get underneath the surface, to do it in real reading matter, and to do it without subscribing to any party dogma? I do not think the threat is necessarily great, or I would not hope for increased circulation for our own magazine. But the danger is there. And here again there is the counter-danger of over-compensation—of being too proud to pay any attention to what readers want, and thus of losing the common touch.

HOW many magazines can you name that consistently, over a period of years, have maintained an independent course, subservient to no interest, dealing honestly and thoroughly with the important questions in our national life, and producing reading matter which one can say with a straight face possesses distinction? There might be more of them if the job were easy.

We editors of *Harper's* think it's worth attempting; and when somebody whose judgment we respect, like the University of Missouri School of Journalism, gives us a pat on the back and says in effect that we're making a good try, we are enormously pleased. But whatever our own success or failure may be, of this journalistic principle we feel sure:

Our country cannot rely in the future wholly upon the wisdom and courage of its government, of its corporations, of its organized labor, of its organized farmers, of its universities, its foundations, its schools, its cultural institutions, its parties, its blocs. It must rely upon its citizens; upon individual men and women; and more especially, if its public life is not to become cynical, its community and family life degraded, its culture brassy—if America is to realize a fraction of the promise that the best in it holds out—it must rely upon possessing always a leaven of well-informed, clear-headed, thoughtful, public-spirited, and civilized men and women who, serving some as recognized leaders and others, however obscure, as a sort of balance-of-power element in the struggles between organized groups, are ready to think for themselves and act as that thinking directs them. And whatever serves those people honestly and well serves America.