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# The Newsweeklies: New and 'Improved'?

Cynthia Grenier 2002

Today one out of five Americans reads a newsmagazine. Most of these readers choose *Time*, with *Newsweek* running close behind and *U.S. News & World Report* trailing badly—though this third magazine is still a megapublication compared with other national newspapers and magazines.

But the nature of the news people are reading in these three periodicals has undergone a mighty shift since September 11, with America having gone to war shortly thereafter. In the years immediately preceding, much of the content had become distinctly soft. With the fall of the Soviet Empire in 1991 and the end of the Cold War, editors of the three major newsweeklies began pulling back on coverage of foreign news. As a case in point, a few years back, *Time* and *Newsweek* were so desperate in their effort to attract buyer attention at newsstands that they ran covers on the late Princess Diana two weeks in a row.

In 1987, *Time* published 11 cover stories relating to foreign news—and only 1 in 1997. Its domestic hard-news covers dwindled from 12 to 9. Thus, the overall total for straight news covers dipped from about 45 percent of the total 10 years ago to only 20 percent last year.

Checking through the list of *Time's* 1997 cover choices, one finds stories on Ellen DeGeneres, Steven Spielberg, Generation X, the pop singer Jewel, Brad Pitt (in a movie related to Buddhism), Bill Cosby and the death of his son, not to mention "What's Cool This Summer," "Turning Fifty" (with a cover photo of Hillary Clinton), "How Mood Drugs Work ... And Fail," and "The Most Fascinating People in America."

The move to successful soft-news covers continued this year until the fateful events of September 11. Until then the top 10 covers for *Time* were "Dale Earnhardt," "The Science of Yoga," "How the Universe Will End," "How to Get Healthier," "Alzheimer's," "How Apes Become Human," "Home Schooling," "Shrinking Ex-President," and "Cancer."

## Public demand

*Newsweek* in 1997 certainly matched *Time* for soft-news cover stories: JonBenet Ramsey, Bob Dylan, Deepak Chopra, plus "The Young Kennedys: A Dynasty in Decline," "Does It Matter What You Weigh?" "The Surprising New Facts About Fat," "The Scary Spread of Asthma and How to Protect Your Kids," "Behind the Mask: The Dark World of Andrew Cunanan ... Versace's Life, Death and Legacy," "Buy? Sell? How to Invest Now," and a special edition on "Your Child From Birth to Three."

And on September 10, 2001, the magazine released to the newsstands of the land a special edition on "Health for Life: Living Longer, Living Better." A press release on the special issue boasted of how the *Today* show, during the week of September 10, would present daily segments featuring content from the issue. "Today is expected to cover various aspects of aging, including its effects on the brain and moods, as well as the effects of diet and exercise on the body," the statement said.

Back in 1998, when Norman Pearlstine was editor in chief of *Time Inc.*, he offered two reasons for all the emphasis on soft news and lifestyles. First, he said, the economy is thriving, "so there's probably less concern with what has traditionally been the hard-news story."

Second, he continued, with the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War, "It's not surprising that the country has turned more inward. There's always been a balance between educating your reader and serving your reader, but we're not getting a lot of demand for international coverage these days in broad consumer publications."

Pearlstine recalls that in 1995, his first year at *Time Inc.*, among the magazine's five worst-selling covers were two on Bosnia, two on Sen. Robert Dole, and one on Social Security. (Among the best-sellers were "How Did the Universe Begin?" "Is the Bible Fact or Fiction?" and "Mysteries of the Deep.")

## No Longer News-Heavy

- The decade-long trend at *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report* has been to drain off hard news and pump in "soft" and entertaining news.
- In 1987, *Time* published 11 cover stories relating to foreign news—and only 1 in 1997.
- The magazine's 1997 cover stories spotlighted Ellen DeGeneres, Steven Spielberg, Generation X, the pop singer Jewel, Brad Pitt's Buddhism movie, and Bill Clinton and the death of his son.
- September 11 jolted all three magazines back to major hard-news coverage.
- However, ongoing intense competition from other print and electronic news media will likely force them to again deemphasize hard news.

While many news executives argue that all research indicates the public doesn't want to know about the rest of the world and therefore hard news should be softened, Ray Cave, a former editor in chief of *Time*, considers that to be a cop-out. The general public has never been truly interested in consequential news, he has said. "But we delivered it, like it or not. By so doing, we piqued public interest in the very matters that must, to some degree, interest the citizens of a democracy."

The trend toward soft news may have begun in the late eighties, when publications such as *People* and *InStyle*, devoted largely to celebrities and popular entertainment, witnessed a megajump in circulation. The weekly newsmagazines, whose circulation was falling off, took their cue from the success of these lightweight publications and duly shifted their content in that direction. Hard news was out. Soft news was in until September 11, when celebrities and entertainment subjects were swiftly relegated to the very back of the book, where they had been at the time newswEEKlies came into existence.

### Birth of the newswEEKlies

What kind of magazines were people reading back in the 1920s? The newsmagazine such as we know it today did not exist. In mid-1926, a survey of magazines popular with college students led off with the *Saturday Evening Post*, closely followed by the *American Magazine*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Literary Digest*. *Time*, which hadn't existed three years earlier, was now in fourteenth place ahead of old favorites like the *New Republic*, *Nation*, and *Outlook*. (*New Republic* and *Nation* were slim pam-

phlets, not all that different in format from what they are nowadays.)

The first newsmagazine was the brainchild of two precocious and brilliant Yale sophomores: Henry R. Luce and Britton Hadden, who developed and launched the concept of a tightly written weekly news digest. They raised \$100,000, a considerable sum in those days, mostly from family and friends. They recruited a tiny staff of inexperienced college graduates, largely classmates, and one or two near-professionals. On March 3, 1923, the first pitifully thin, black-and-white issue of *Time* hit U.S. newsstands, selling for 15 cents.

The tone of the early issues of *Time*, more set by Hadden (who died at 31 from a streptococcus infection) than Luce, was irreverent and sassy when not downright cynical. In terms of style, it also tended to be fairly blunt in the way it pushed facts at the reader. A *Time* specialty, for instance, was to give the more or less colorful, juicy little detail often ignored in standard newspaper reports: the menu at a state dinner, the vintage of the wine with which the food was always "washed down," the color of the president's necktie. Writers also developed the *Time* style, with its piled-on descriptive adjectives, as in "jut-jawed, haystack-haired Henry Wallace."

News was written from a jaunty, personal point of view. Luce and Hadden put their copy together by clipping articles on any given subject, say, education, and mailing them off to poet Archibald MacLeish, then a lawyer and teacher working in Boston. For \$10 a week, he put together a lively, incisive digest of the clippings. Dull news suddenly became fun reading in this new magazine.

Over the decades there has been many a modification, ranging from style to political point of view. Today, 26.5 million people around the world read *Time*. The publication was named the No. 1 hottest magazine in America by *Adweek* for its demonstration of editorial and business vitality twice in recent years—in 2000 and its seventy-fifth anniversary year, 1998.

The statistics for *Time* readership are not radically different from those of its two competitors. The median age is 43.4, though 30 percent of *Time* readers are between the ages of 18 and 34, which may account for its fairly extensive coverage of pop culture in recent years. The magazine's international editions are read in more than 210 countries, which are covered by 28 news bureaus ranging from Washington to Hanoi.

### *Newsweek* and *U.S. News*

*Newsweek*, prime rival to *Time*, was founded in 1933 by Thomas Martyn, a former foreign editor at *Time*. That first issue, called *News-Week*, featured seven photographs from the week's news on the cover. It cost 10 cents a copy, \$4 for a year's subscription, and had a circulation of 50,000. In 1961, *Newsweek* was bought by the Washington Post Company. Today, *Newsweek* has a worldwide circu-

lation of more than 4 million and a total readership of more than 21 million.

From 1933, when *Newsweek* was launched, to 1972, readers abroad received the U.S. edition of the magazine. But in December 1972, the Washington Post Company announced a major expansion program for the international newsmagazine. Since then, it has been a division of *Newsweek Inc.*, with its own business and editorial staffs. Currently, the magazine appears in more than 190 countries around the world. In 1986, *Newsweek* began its first foreign edition in Japan. In October 1991, *Newsweek* introduced a Korean-language edition. By May 1996, it was publishing *Newsweek en Español*, launched and distributed to Latin America. An Arabic version appeared in June 2000, and last fall saw the publication of *Newsweek Polska*.

*Newsweek* boasts 11 foreign news bureaus, ranging from Bangkok to Beijing, and 9 domestic offices, from Atlanta to San Francisco. It claims to hold more prestigious National Magazine Awards, given by the American Society of Magazine Editors, than any other newsweekly.

A quick glance over the cover stories up to September 11 of last year reveals that, like *Time*, *Newsweek* has stayed away from international news. Some of the cover titles were "The Stem Cell Wars," "Battle for the Soul of the Boy Scouts," "Jesus Rocks!" "Truth about Fertility," and, understandably, "Remembering Katherine Graham" (Graham was the publication's owner).

Which brings us to the third of our three major newsmagazines: *U.S. News & World Report*, which came into existence in the thirties, propitious years for the start-up of this new form of journalism. In 1933, journalist David Lawrence published the first issue of a weekly newspaper called the *United States News*. Six years later, he launched a magazine called *World Report*. With the merger of the two publications in 1948, *U.S. News & World Report* was born.

From 1962 to 1984, *U.S. News* was employee-owned. In 1984, publisher and real estate developer Mortimer Zuckerman bought the company. He is also chairman and co-publisher of the *New York Daily News*. A graduate of Harvard Law School and a former associate professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Business for nine years, Zuckerman is admirably equipped to participate in the many talk shows on current affairs that appear so often on national television.

## Expansion to the Internet

Zuckerman has had a penchant for changing editors in chief every four or five years, always selecting newsmen of high quality. Brian Duffy, who stepped up to the job in June of last year, had started working at *U.S. News* in 1986. He moved to the *Washington Post* in 1996, went to the *Wall Street Journal* as investigative editor in 1997, and finally returned to *U.S. News* as executive editor in Au-

## The Competition

The rise of the 24-hour cable news channel over the past 20 years (and especially over the past 7), followed by the Internet explosion starting roughly 8 years ago, was a one-two punch to America's three major weekly newsmagazines.

The vastly increased competition that resulted was like nothing the periodicals had ever faced in their 70 to 80 years of existence. CNN, the granddaddy of cable television news, was founded in 1980 and today reaches 81 million households. MSNBC, started in 1995, is already in 61 million households, and Fox (established in 1996) reaches 57 million. The World Wide Web, meanwhile, reached 50 percent of U.S. households in 2000 and is expected to be in 75 percent of them by 2005.

As cable penetrated more and more households in the United States, and as the trickle of Internet connections grew to a torrent, the alarm level rose in the newsweeklies' newsrooms. Even though *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report* appeared to have a corner on a niche market by serving up a lively digest of the immediately preceding week's news, the new electronic media made inroads into their readership. Cable news, too, was lively and moreover had that mesmerizing quality, beloved by advertisers, common to all TV programming. Web sites could also be made aesthetically appealing, even stunning, as well as excitingly interactive, with a multiplicity of hypertext and graphic links.

Invading the newsmagazines' turf, both cable and Internet news could deliver to users a serviceable sense of what had transpired around the nation and world during the precious week. In addition, with their 24-hour news cycle, they could provide users with virtually real-time breaking news—something far beyond the reach of the newsweeklies.

—The Editor

gust 1998. *U.S. News*, which today has a circulation of 2 million and a readership of 11.2 million, in recent years has been noted for its annual rankings of American colleges, universities, and hospitals.

The magazine began its Internet venture in 1993 with a two-year stint as a content provider to the CompuServe Information Service. *U.S. News Online* ([www.usnews.com](http://www.usnews.com)), the magazine's Web site, debuted on November 6, 1995. All articles from *U.S. News*' print edition also appear on *U.S. News Online*.

*Time*, owned by America Online, is on the Internet, too, at [www.time.com](http://www.time.com). As of last year, *Time* brought out a new monthly, *On Magazine*, devoted to matters of the World

Wide Web ([www.onmagazine.com](http://www.onmagazine.com)), aimed at the average PC user. *Newsweek* also has its Web site ([www.msnbc.com/news/NW-front—Front.asp](http://www.msnbc.com/news/NW-front—Front.asp)), a joint operation with cable channel MSNBC.

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The newsweeklies’ trend toward soft, fluffy copy appears to be firmly entrenched—the post-September 11 lurch toward foreign news notwithstanding. James Fallows, one of the many excellent former editors of U.S. News, wrote in his book *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine Democracy* that the newsweeklies for

many decades had a grip on a nationwide media niche, but that competition from a variety of sources, especially in the past decade and a half, has broken it.

“When *Time*, *Newsweek*, and U.S. News started, before World War II,” Fallows wrote, “there were no first-rate nationwide newspapers like the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal* to reach a far-flung national audience that demanded what the local paper could not provide. And of course there was no television. But now these alternatives exist, and the newsmagazines are left not to compete against one another but with the thousand other ways [for example, the Internet and cable TV] that intelligent readers can spend their money and time.”

Driven by this competition, newsweekly editors tilted ever more toward titillating content in the hope of luring impulse buyers at the newsstand. Obviously, since September 11 and the war in Afghanistan, foreign news has resumed its place as a major cover item—but for how long is anyone’s guess.

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