

News of the Weak

by William Murchison

EX-NEWSPAPERMAN THAT I AM, the saga of “old” media decline in the ultra-high-tech 21st century engages every nerve ending, every tear duct. No reason to rehearse the details. Newspapers and magazines—the “dead-tree” dispensers of news and analysis—don’t cut it with nearly as large an audience as they once enjoyed. Just to stay alive, print operations are reinventing themselves. Whaddathewant?—“they” meaning the customers. How can we give it to them? It’s a mad kind of exercise, conducted by sometimes the gravest-faced publications you ever expected to see groveling before Public Opinion. The *New York Times*, for instance.

Anyway, it’s *Newsweek*’s turn. We old newsies can’t help looking, calculating, evaluating, not least because of what we learn about the customers and their fast-changing desires.

Back before arugula, smartphones, and breathalyzer tests, households (such as mine) that subscribed to the Luce publications—*Time* and *Life*—didn’t think much about *Newsweek*, which professed to compete with *Time*. *Newsweek*, founded in 1933, was OK; it just didn’t offer anything Mr. Luce and his minions didn’t give us, often as not with greater zest and style than its competitor publication. On the other hand, *Newsweek* is major—a branch of the *Washington Post* family tree. The *Post*, for all that conservatives used to despise its anti-Nixon, or just plain liberal, commitments, is a pretty solid outfit from a newsgathering and reporting standpoint. What happens within its family has, shall we say, resonance outside the family.

In May, having lost money the previous year and reduced staff by nearly a third, *Newsweek* made known it was giving itself a journalistic Botox job. The announcement, from editor Jon Meacham, carried an easily discounted air of importance.

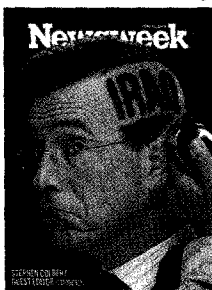
Executives changing or shaking up things always talk as Meacham more or less did, in advising *Newsweek* readers that the “new magazine for a changing world,” duly “reinvented and rethought,” would bring them “original reporting, provocative (but not partisan) arguments and unique voices.” The new *Newsweek* was going to assume its readers already knew the news. It would offer them “the benefit of careful work discovering new facts and prompting unexpected thoughts.”

The mag debuted May 25. I plunked down my credit card at Barnes & Noble and winced at the six-buck price tag. (As a contemporary once reminded me, “The problem with being old is, you remember when everything was cheap.” Including magazines.) From the cover...well, now, this wasn’t very trailblazing, was it? The eyebrow-to-chin version of Barack Obama smiled out at us. Evidently Meacham & Co. had decided the great American thirst for news about the best-publicized president of the past several decades had not yet been slaked. Readers got “an exclusive interview,” conducted by Meacham. “What’s the hardest thing you’ve had to do?” Meacham inquired of the president. “What have you learned watching the Republican Party the last 115 days or so?” “Are you expecting to continue some preventive detention?” “Were you surprised at how quickly your family became part of cultural iconography?” “Do you watch any cable news?” Anyway...

Meacham explained in his column the new *Newsweek* approach: “[T]here are now only four sections: SCOPE (for short-term pieces, including Conventional Wisdom and the rechristened Indignity Index; THE TAKE (our columnists); FEATURES (longer-form narratives and essays); and CULTURE.” Along with the Obama interview went a piece on George W. Bush “in exile” in Texas, Tina Brown’s

look at Nancy Pelosi, and a review of medical progress on autism. Nothing egregious; nothing memorable either.

Then, two weeks later, came the issue edited by Stephen Colbert. Yes, Colbert. On the cover, no kidding, and speaking from the editor's page thitherto filled by Meacham, who, from another site in the magazine, sought to explain. Turning over the editor's chair to the popular TV satirist, whose shtick is that he's a vain right-wing commentator, would provide the magazine "a fresh voice...and access to his audience—an audience of politically and culturally engaged people." This was no "exercise in silliness but in satire." That would be a new one all right—the newsmagazine as vehicle for comedy. Assuming *Newsweek* still views itself as a newsmagazine.



COLBERT TOOK ADVANTAGE OF all the fun at the party to which he had been invited. He wrote and signed all the letters to the editor. He designed the cover. He wrote flippant (and, to my thinking, unfunny) footnotes to the *Newsweek* columnists' IDs. It was likely a good thing George Will had the week off. Had Colbert trifled with his ID...

Also, Colbert chose the features, which, to give him credit, weren't bad; besides which, all concerned Iraq, where he recently entertained U.S. troops. I particularly enjoyed the one on the West Point class of '09, bidding farewell to Benny Havens, saddling up for combat duty. On the other hand, Meacham's staff couldn't have come up with the same ideas? Aha, yes, they could have, but those ideas would have lacked the cachet bestowed on them by a TV satirist. We begin to grasp here additional, and more unsettling, knowledge than we have had to date perhaps about public seriousness on major public issues; likewise about the aspirations, such as they are, of the U.S. education establishment. A Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer—Meacham, for his life of Andrew Jackson—seeks out a television personality to help him spread understanding, or something, about a foreign war. It is a little strange.

A few readers certainly thought so. Donald H. Crosby of Springfield, VA, asked, "Who the hell is Stephen Colbert? And who cares?" "Please stop trying to entertain us," exhorted Gary Ruschke of Los Altos, CA. "I go to your magazine because I want news."

Then came the Oprah Winfrey issue, all about "Crazy Talk: Oprah, Wacky Cures, and You." Some pretty good news hooks, one must admit: the empress of daytime TV, wackiness, personal health, and—of course, inevitably, for that clinching inducement to the reader—"you." It seems, according to the text of the cover story, that Suzanne Somers and Jenny McCarthy have been turning up on Oprah touting quack remedies for this and that. Somers is apparently famous for promoting hormone replacement, rubbing progesterone on her arms and gulping down, as the cover story related, "60 vitamins and other preparations every day." There's more, but I don't believe, out of delicacy, I'll go into it.

And so the show, as *Newsweek* tells it, pitches "wonder cures and miracle treatments that are questionable or flat-out wrong, and sometimes dangerous." Here's "news" all right—for non-Oprah-watching Americans, of whom there may still be a few. Whether it deserves to decorate the cover of *Newsweek* is for the customers ultimately to decide. Meacham certainly hopes they will vote for him with their dollars. Indeed, *Newsweek's* website got a workout in response. First there was "Hey, Did You Hear We Took on Oprah? The Blog-o-Sphere Responds." Soon there followed, again on the website, "Is It Racist to Criticize Oprah?"—a non-question, one might have supposed, until *Newsweek* got our, or someone's, attention by raising it and having Raina Kelley respond. Then—ta-da!—Oprah herself responded. How about that? Talk produced more talk, on which more and more ears and eyes came to rest. Talk isn't cheap, you know—it's the way to riches. If people aren't going to talk about the cap and trade system, and believe me, they aren't, then we'll change the subject—to Oprah.

Where from here? For *Newsweek*? For journalism? No one knows with any certainty. Universal education seems in the end not to have produced the thirst for knowledge that many once forecast: knowledge pertaining, shall we say, to larger questions than whether it's racist to criticize Oprah Winfrey.

IT'S VERY HARD TO PUZZLE OUT these matters in an atmosphere of continuous technological change and opportunity. While getting ready to write this story, I read in the *New York Times* that global positioning satellite devices for cars—the things that boss you around when you're looking for an open 7-Eleven—are so over, what with smartphones now

doing the job. Gee, one more trend missed. The GPS I never even bought or tried is going out of style. To be sure, I haven't got a smartphone either.

It's appropriate, while speaking in the context of *Newsweek's* makeover, to raise the question: so what if a 76-year-old newsmagazine debases itself, gambling, or trying to, with a market demographic—the young, the heedless, or both—that doesn't care who the hell Lyndon Johnson was, far less what's happened since he died? Technology is part of the dead-tree problem. A shift in public assumptions is, it seems to me, the larger part. We used to assume we needed what *Newsweek* and *Time* and *Life* and *U.S. News & World Report* and the *Saturday Evening Post* gave us. What we learned made us in indefinable ways better citizens of our nation, wiser voters, more knowledgeable and far-sighted parents. These were aspirations more than realities, perhaps. Yet upon them democratic theory depended in no small measure.

The First Amendment is the *first* amendment because, aside from affirming the right to worship, it protects the right of expression, which latter right keeps our political keepers at least halfway honest. Most of us old-time newsies are free speech people because we think people are capable of sorting out claims and counter-claims (if sometimes belatedly, as we may be realizing with respect to the Obama policies), then judging more or less rightly.

A seriousness—even a semi-seriousness—about “news” is among the prerequisites for intelligent—or semi-intelligent—participation in public affairs. With a certain reluctance, therefore, one acknowledges that an often one-sided, and that side liberal,

publication like *Newsweek* has a part to play in the national dialogue; further, that its own diminishment of that role, its newfound zest for looking over Oprah Winfrey's shoulder, doesn't enlarge the possibilities for sifting and sorting out large political and philosophical claims.

You can exit a discussion such as this one with a pretty low impression of American culture—and maybe you should. Is the decline of the old print media all about the ascent of new communications tools, with all their Twitters and tweets? One could suggest as much, but that assertion needs qualification. None of this stuff just happened overnight. When *People* magazine becomes the cash cow on the old Luce domain, one deduces there's a lot less interest in “hard news” than high-minded editors sometimes like to pretend. The ascendancy of *People* occurred years ago, and things have only gotten worse, as evidenced by, not least, the growth of a whole industry of *People* imitators.

The merger of entertainment and “news” in the pages of the new *Newsweek* isn't especially edifying, but an air of financial inevitability surrounds it. Meacham reasons thus: We can be highbrow and serious and civic-minded as all get-out and go broke. Alternatively, we can talk about Suzanne Somers and thrive. He's probably got it about right. Which raises the question of what schools are doing to raise tastes and arouse a thirst race for serious—I said serious—knowledge. A whole lot less, seemingly, than they did when *Newsweek* and *Time* were in their heydays. That's clearly a topic for another day, but it's hard to leave off a disquisition like this one without observing that what the culture wants, the culture generally gets. It seems no longer to want in high degree the kind of information it used to regard as essential.

As I write, the world revels—revels—in the after-shocks of the Michael Jackson funeral. The media just couldn't serve up enough of it to us. Yes, *Newsweek* was there, with a cover story about the late “transracial icon.” “We'd never seen anyone like this before...and we won't forget him—until the big Neverland swallows us all.” That's a story the new *Newsweek* seems gorgeously qualified to tell, if there's anyone around to listen and understand. ❧

William Murchison is a columnist for *Creators Syndicate* and author of *Mortal Follies: Episcopalians and the Crisis of Mainline Christianity* (Encounter Books).

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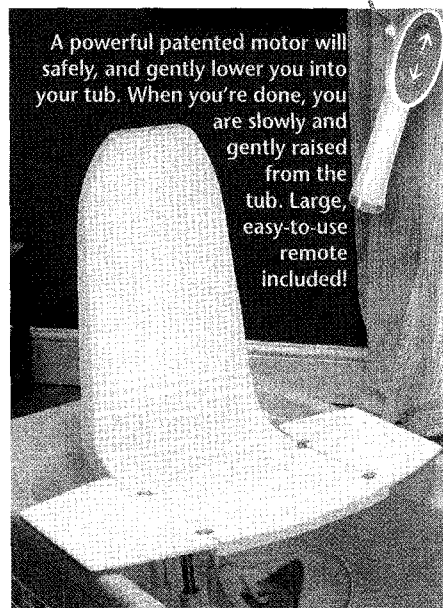
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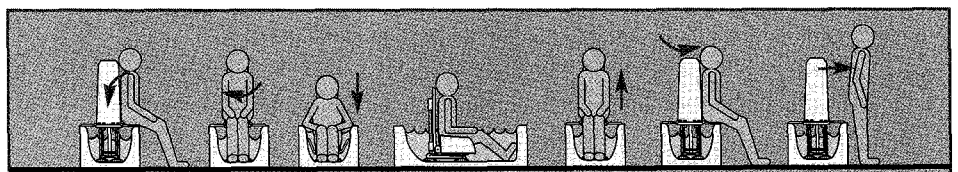
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The War on Watchdogs

Inspectors general fight for independence, while Obama brings the “Chicago Way” to Washington.

by Robert Stacy McCain

HOUSE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN Rep. Edolphus Towns was clearly angered to learn that the Treasury Department had no idea what financial institutions were doing with taxpayer money they got from the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), the \$789 billion Wall Street bailout rushed through Congress in October 2008 amid panicky talk of a global economic meltdown.

Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner’s department had “taken the position that it will not even ask TARP recipients what they are doing with the taxpayers’ money,” the nine-term Democrat from Brooklyn said at a July 21 hearing of the committee. “In short, the taxpayers now have a \$700 billion spending program that’s being run under the philosophy of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell.’”

The chairman’s fellow Democrat, Maryland Rep. Elijah Cummings, was similarly outraged.

“For us to get past this economic situation that we find ourselves in, the public has to believe that we’re doing the right thing,” Cummings said. “If we can’t show them that we are doing the right thing with their money, we’re going to have problems.”

This sudden outburst of Democratic concern about fiscal responsibility was caused by the quarterly report issued a day earlier by “SIGTARP” Neil Barofsky, the special investigator general assigned to watchdog the banking bailout bonanza. By mid-July, Barofsky had already launched 35 separate criminal and civil investigations involving alleged misuse of TARP funds, and his report disclosed that Geithner wasn’t even requiring the beneficiaries of the program to submit itemized accounts of where the

money was going. So far as anyone at Treasury knew, American taxpayers were footing the bill to provide lingerie and jewelry for the mistresses of hedge-fund executives.

Barofsky’s report landed like a bombshell on Capitol Hill amid a growing mood of bipartisan indignation fueled by evidence that the main result of the TARP bailout was to pad the bottom line of giant Wall Street firms. A week earlier, Goldman Sachs had reported record second-quarter profits of \$3.4 billion, scarcely nine months after taking \$10 billion in bailout money at the height of last fall’s hysteria about a worldwide financial apocalypse. News of the earnings windfall at Goldman Sachs sparked a two-week stock market surge that saw the Dow Jones Industrial Average gain more than 800 points, but it also con-

