

# Letters to the Communications Editor



## WAY AHEAD OF US

FOR JUST A MOMENT I thought Editor Richard L. Tobin was describing our publication in his editorial "The Trend Toward the Ten-Cent Newspaper" [SR, Mar. 10]. We *are* what he only theorizes on: "a more compact, and more precise newspaper . . . new editorial vista . . . bold new steps along the road of the magazine format." That's *World*, the compact weekly newspaper, to a "T."

But *World* goes even further. It sets as its goal the return of balanced, objective, "both sides" coverage to *significant* news and major issues. It attempts to bring into proper perspective the positive news concerning people as well as governments.

So you see, *World* has already put into practice—successfully—what Mr. Tobin thinks might be "quite possible."

One further thought. Mr. Tobin's reference to the experiments of John Denson of the *Herald Tribune* calls to mind the many times that scientists, working in widely separate areas, have, unknown to each other, arrived at similar conclusions and like "cures" almost simultaneously. We think we are well on our way to breathing new life into the sagging newspaper industry. And we applaud Mr. Denson's efforts.

WILLIAM L. CLAYTON, JR.

Manager, Circulation and Promotion,  
*World*.

Washington, D.C.

DESPITE THE VIEWS of your commentator, what the New York *Herald Tribune* is attempting is an experiment in yellow journalism in modern dress. Here are two examples taken from the *Herald Tribune's* editions which reach the hinterland here.

1. When Gary Powers was released, the paper devoted part of its top front page to questioning Power's patriotism, and it continued to keep that question alive.

2. On the morning following TV's guided tour through the White House with Mrs. Kennedy, a front-page story dealt almost entirely with the implication of White House blackmail to get contributions for Mrs. Kennedy's project.

I have never in a long lifetime seen such editorializing in the guise of news.

FRANK A. SIEVERMAN, JR.

Lancaster, Pa.

## A CACTUS IS A CACTUS IS A CACTUS

WHILE I AM FORCED to agree with the technical point of Mr. Wilcox's letter concerning Ocotillo "cactus" [SR, Mar. 10], I am also compelled to suggest that he delve a little further into actual usage of the word. Having never been to Wisconsin, I've no idea whether the Ocotillo grows there or not, but being a native of the

Southwest (New Mexico) I am on "kissing-cousin" terms with the plant and have serious doubts that *anyone* in that part of the country could point out *Fouquieria Splendens* to him. "Vine cactus" is one of its most widely used misnomers.

Better research, Mr. Wilcox, better research.

MRS. KEN PYBURN.

Pasadena, Calif.

I WAS PARTICULARLY interested in the letter from Kenneth L. Wilcox. Possibly he will be interested in examining a typical desert postcard. If Mr. Wilcox is right, the Western Publishing Co. of Los Angeles has been getting away with fooling the public for years. Also, in reference to the last sentence in Mr. Wilcox's letter, I suggest that he read again the first two paragraphs in my article [SR, Feb. 10]. (We pulp writers have been defending ourselves for years.)

RICHARD HILL WILKINSON.

Panorama City, Calif.

## PRaise FOR SHAYON

I HAVE JUST READ Robert Lewis Shayon's piece "The Economics of Controversy" [SR, Mar. 10]. It is excellent; it is too bad the Federal Communications Commission didn't have him as an advisor. I heard most of the testimony in the FCC hearings and was appalled at the almost purposeless meandering of counsel and commission.

DAVID LEVY.

Weston, Conn.

## BELIEVING THE NEWS

THE ELMO ROPER STUDY of believability in news media, as reported by John Tebbel [SR, Mar. 10], presents evidence that is as regrettable as it is inevitable. It should warn all news media, not just the newspapers, of a condition and an effect that can eventually reduce the believability of all post-fact reporting.

As television continues its live coverage of Presidential news conferences and astronaut launchings on the one hand and the fire in the local creamery on the other, this effect sets in. The consumer says, "I saw it myself, with my own eyes."

He believes what he sees.

But knowing what he sees is another matter; and how accurately he sees—and how thoroughly—depends upon such matters as his training, his skill in the art and science of observation, and his background. No need here to elaborate on what has long been known—that eye-witnessing is not the most dependable source of information known to man.

So when one sees with his own eyes the expression on the face of the President, and hears not only his words but his intonation and his tempo as he comments

upon the activities of Russian planes in the Berlin corridor, one is going to agree or disagree with the newspaper headline that reads "JFK Irked by Russ in Corridor." He'll agree if he saw the expression as an irk; he'll disagree if he saw it as anything else. The mathematical laws that govern coincidences favor disagreement far more than agreement. And down goes the score of believability for the newspaper.

It doesn't matter whether, in any particular case, the headline writer or the reporter is closer to the truth than the majority of the 10,000,000 or so who saw the conference and pounced upon their own conclusions. It doesn't matter from how deep in contrivance and in pseudo-information the telecast may have been presented. All this has nothing to do with making any one of the 10,000,000 believe anything other than what he thinks he saw.

Let's hope that, even though most of the newspapers chose not to report the Roper study, it is getting serious attention among the editors. In this connection would it be fair to suggest that questions such as these be raised:

Is it conducive to increased believability to continue fumbling around with policy and bias and headline cliché?

With ten or twenty or forty million eye-witnesses to the event—probably seeing it more clearly than if they had actually been in the room or on the site—can the news media afford to be less than objective?

Is objectivity itself enough?

Is the time at hand to become more than objective—to modify the James Gordon Bennett-W. R. Hearst syndrome in favor of giving more space to interpretation and thoughtful analysis than in the past, when the newspaper was the individual's chief source of public information?

It is entirely possible that the millions of eye-witnesses, once the thrill of exposure is over, will come to believe the writer and the commentator who helps them to find meaning in what they have seen and heard. Perhaps Howard K. Smith is right, and we have moved into a new era of journalism when objectivity is not enough. Better than bias, certainly, but still not enough.

MILO RYAN,

Professor,

School of Communications,  
University of Washington.

Seattle, Wash.

I THOUGHT WE HAD learned the lesson that prestige is too elusive a commodity to be measured by opinion survey, but along comes John Tebbel to take seriously such a survey of "What News Does the Public Believe?"

The weakness of this survey is easily shown: The professional poll-takers reported that only 12 per cent of those interviewed considered radio news "most believable" among the various media, yet

they also reported that "only 9 per cent found radio least believable."

To project this kind of reasoning to some distant future, I suppose the poll-takers will one day tell us that 90 per cent of the public considers one of the other media "most believable," while 86 per cent regard that same medium as "least believable."

It seems obvious that the opinions reported in the survey related more to the importance of each medium than to its "believability." Thus, television is taking a greater place in the individual life, more at the expense of newspapers than of radio or magazines.

To tie this trend to the current clamor that newspapers are losing the public's confidence seems to me unjustified.

HALFORD R. HOUSER.

Pompano Beach, Fla.

IF, ACCORDING TO John Tebbel, "nearly all of the free American press apparently did not think worth printing" the fact that "newspapers have declined in public believability by 8 per cent" in the past two years, can it also be true that the time is past "when newspapers could not in fact be trusted to give the news except in a highly partisan way"?

Mr. Tebbel might have made his point more effectively if he had suppressed that small bit of information.

BARBARA S. MARKS.

Scarsdale, N.Y.

JOHN TEBBEL'S excellent commentary on news media the public believes led off with statistics from a poll of a nature to please all victims of monophobia. The poll purported to present a "cross-section" of the nation's adults by contacts with one out of some 40,000 of the public. It made a case for "seeing is believing" and booted "you can't believe all you see" into a shelter.

The days when men gathered around the pot-bellied stove and aired, argued, debated, and even fought to prove how right their beliefs were are gone. Today one doubts if the urban run of the public knows what it believes. If TV is more believable than newspapers, one assumes this includes commercials. A distressing notion. Does the Hon. Horace Liberal take Bufferin? If newspapers as believable mediums are slipping, it could be that editors have forgotten the Joe Gelatins who write letters to the editor. Only in a newspaper can Joe air his beliefs and gripes, and can Clyde reply to Joe. The semantically coached TV'er communicates, then fades out for a "word from our sponsor," leaving a goodly number of the 39,999 of the 40,000 public unable to reply, or even be polled.

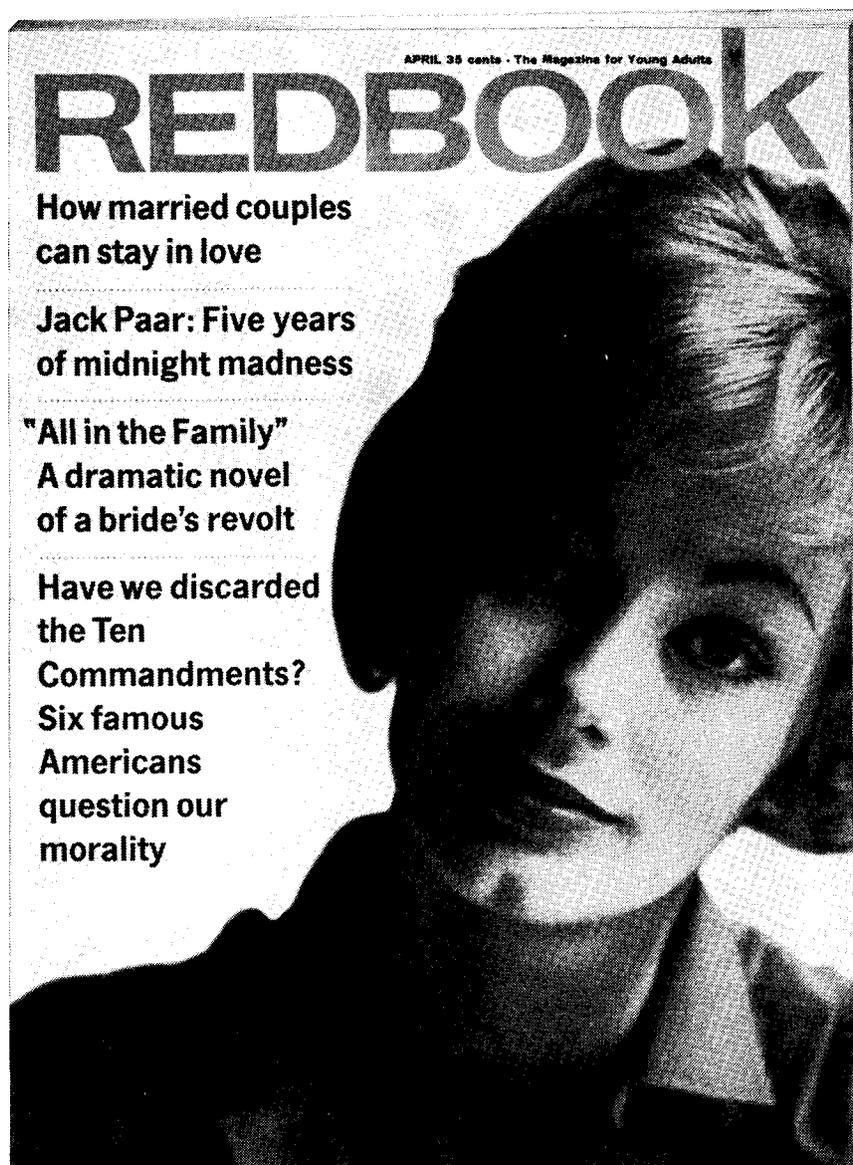
It is my casual theory that the unbelievables fear certain of their treasured beliefs will be shown to have no basis in fact. This emotional jolt is the basis of frustration. Instead of columns of holy political writ from Washington correspondents, for example, let the "public" Joes air their views. Mr. Tebbel's piece, once he got away from percentages, was most interesting and believable.

LOUIS D'ARMAND.

Clearwater, Fla.

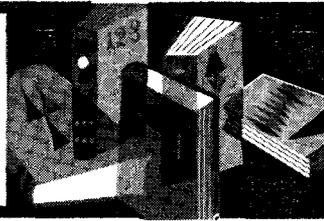
SR/April 14, 1962

# The only major magazine in America with 8\* straight years of gains in both circulation and advertising linage



\*and well on its way to the 9th!

# Books in Communications



## Self-Portrait of the Artist as an Adman

By JAMES F. FIXX

EVERYBODY from Vance Packard to the housewife at the supermarket thinks he knows what goes on in an advertising man's mind, but firsthand evidence is as rare as a TV show without commercials. It is therefore with considerable interest that the advertising and communications world is now reading a privately printed volume of speeches, articles, memoranda, and occasional pieces by the founder and head of one of the five or six biggest agencies in the country, Leo Burnett. The book, "Communications of an Advertising Man," spans some twenty-five years of Mr. Burnett's thinking and offers, in its 350 pages, a sustained inside look at what it takes to find room at the top.

Productwise, thoughtwise, and businesswise (his words, not mine), Mr. Burnett's emphasis is on creative originality and the high role of advertising. As recently as last year he said, "I believe that advertising, in its broad sense as a controlled means of communications, is in its infancy, not only as a tool for the dynamic growth of our economic system and a factor in our culture, but as a powerful force in the sale of ideas which can help promote peace with freedom in our own country and throughout the world." Yet he can also be severely critical of his trade, as when he takes admen to task for chronic exaggeration and dullness. "If the public is bored today," he declared in a speech not long ago, "then let's blame it on the fact that it is being handed boring messages created by bored advertising people." And in another speech: "I have learned that the American purchaser is a tough little baby. . . . Quick perception of misrepresentation, exaggeration, half-truths, and weasel words are part of his built-in protective mechanism."

Some 200 years ago Samuel Johnson, agog at the commercial wonders of eighteenth-century London, remarked, "The trade of advertising is now so near perfection that it is not easy to propose any improvement." Leo Burnett and his confreres around the country have of course proved Johnson spectacularly wrong, and "Communications of an Advertising Man," with

its advice to copywriters, analyses of ads, and observations on the craft, suggests some of the reasons why. The collection is not available in bookstores but has been distributed here and there in the trade; it will be worth any advertising man's while to snoop around until he finds a copy.

**WAR OF THE WORDS:** One slice of writing's vast spectrum is the bailiwick of a largely obscure but staggeringly prolific band of scribes whose works are peopled with such exotic characters as ergs and amperes, cogs and capsules, apes and astronauts. They are obscure because much of their work is read only by specialists, prolific because it is their job to coax into words the fastest-growing thing since Pinocchio's nose. These writers are those whose province is that layman's *terra incognita*, science and technology. And the woods are full of them. From Canaveral to Cal Tech, and at every plant, laboratory, and reactor in between, thousands of science and technical writers are hunched over typewriters trying to make such concepts as  $E=mc^2$  as plain as ABC. The quality of the copy they turn out is inversely proportional to the gravitational attraction of scientific mumbo-jumbo, direct-

### Little Words

AS I LOOK BACK over the people who did the most to shape my attitudes about advertising, one of the foremost is the late Art Kudner. One of my treasured possessions is a copy of a book which Art wrote to his newborn son in 1936. One chapter dealt with "words," as follows:

Never fear big long words.  
Big long words name little things.  
All big things have little names.  
Such as life and death, peace and war.  
Or dawn, day, night, hope, love, home.  
Learn to use little words in a big way.  
It is hard to do but they say what you mean.  
When you don't know what you mean, use big words.  
That often fools little people.

—From "Communications of an Advertising Man."

ly proportional to the distance between themselves and Fowler's "Modern English Usage," and at root often square.

It is to the growing ranks of science writers, no matter which of C. P. Snow's two cultures they write for, that William Gilman has addressed "The Language of Science: A Guide to Effective Writing" (Harcourt, Brace & World, \$4.95). A former newsman (United Press, New York Times, North American Newspaper Alliance) and *Popular Science* editor, he writes knowledgeably and entertainingly about the difficulty of making a reader understand the enormous sprawl of contemporary science. Offering examples good and bad, Gilman threads his way through dense tangles of scientific knowledge which, as he says, "can tie the poor brain in knots"—especially when offered up to a reader in such unruly clumps of prose as this Joycean appraisal of a new airplane:

Having considerable fuselage ahead of the wing, C-133 exhibits when a sharp roll is induced to one side, then the other lateral shaking which is definite enough to warrant either a firm stance against it or being buckled into a seat.

Gilman's exhibits of ambiguity, aimlessness, and downright literary anarchy, culled from newspapers, magazines, press handouts, and intramural scientific reports, constitute a veritable rogues' gallery of those who have committed assault and battery on the English language (though some of his accusations strike me more as quibbles than true crimes). And his guides to clarity and common sense, even if they are usually light-years away from the universe of Strunk and Fowler, should help settle the style of the scientific writer who isn't quite buckled into his seat. For any writer needs all the help he can get—as the author himself demonstrates by mistaking *naturalism* for *naturalness*, sowing his pages with a crop of clichés, and grafting on a phrase with that rusty old piece of bailing wire, the word *with* ("Science staggers under about 25 billion words published each year, with the figure growing exponentially").

One final caveat: Someone ought to establish a new award, to be presented to any publisher willing to commit the apparent heresy of printing a book about writing without decorating the dust jacket with either (a) a typewriter or (b) fuzzy, blown-up typewriter type. "The Language of Science," while there's no typewriter type on its jacket, does have the familiar old machine, nicely designed by Ellen Raskin but a typewriter nonetheless. Why not, for a change, a picture of that *sine qua non* of good writing, a blue pencil?