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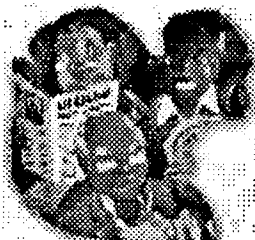
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## The Critics: Magazines: Brill's Content

by Michael Gartner

*Michael Gartner is chairman and principal owner of the Iowa Cubs, a triple-A farm team. He won a Pulitzer Prize in 1997 for his editorials in the Ames, Iowa, Tribune, and has had a long career in journalism, both print and broadcast.*



Any magazine that has Calvin Trillin and Mike Pride and Jon Katz and David McClintick as contributing editors can't be all bad.



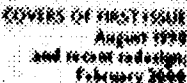
Any magazine that has Bill Kovach looking over its shoulder can't be all bad.



Any magazine that takes no subsidies from the Pew Charitable Trust can't be all bad.



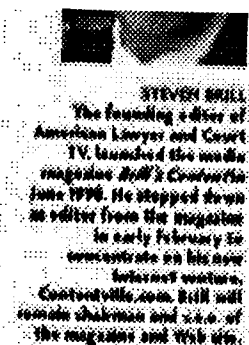
So the egotistically and eponymously named *Brill's Content* -- with the musings and reportings of Trillin and gang and with the watchful eye of ombudsman Bill Kovach and without the moneyed influence and pernicious agenda of Pew and the civic-journalism crowd -- is not all bad.



In fact, pretentious though it can be, it's quite good. It's a lot better than it was a year-and-a-half ago, when it was launched as a ten-times-a-year magazine for "enthusiasts of the information age." The question is: Will it continue to be fearless and feisty now that it has made a business alliance with media companies that it covers with a supposedly unblinking eye?



The deal is a Web site with CBS, NBC and, among others, the publisher of *New York* and other magazines. It was announced in early February, when the ink was barely dry on the issue of *Brill's Content* that raised questions about how independent the



media companies can be as they make alliances with one another.

"Clearly, this all bears watching, and just as clearly, it's complicated and intimidating," *Brill's Content* editor Eric Effron said in his introduction to the January 2000 issue. The cover story, by *Brill's* senior writer Rifka Rosenwein, was headlined: "Why Media Mergers Matter. Having a few huge corporations control our outlets of expression could lead to less aggressive news coverage and a more muted

marketplace of ideas."

Rosenwein's story noted that "where you sit, of course, often determines where you stand on certain issues." So will Steven Brill's new seat change his magazine's stance? Brill is giving up the title of editor-in-chief of his magazine, turning the job over to a former executive editor of *Talk* magazine, David Kuhn, but the founder will remain chief executive of his company and will remain involved in the editorial process. The new venture "raises the issue of whether Mr. Brill is compromising the magazine's independence," *New York Times* reporter Alex Kuczynski wrote. But Brill responded that ombudsman Kovach would keep a close eye on things and then, like most publishers or media executives, said his own ventures were above corruption.

(A year ago, in a note calling attention to a wonderful *Brill's* story about how ABC News killed an unfavorable story about Disney -- its owner -- then editor Michael Kramer noted that "the disturbing story is also replete with the 'right noises,' powerful people offering strong words declaring that neither Disney nor ABC would ever countenance the very interference" the story documents.)

Clearly, this all bears watching, and just as clearly it's complicated and intimidating.

But right now, at least, *Brill's Content* is very good.

Here's why:

It's good because it has lots of interesting little stuff ("Stuff We Like," telling of the fascinating book, the goofy Web site, the notable columnist) as well as lots of interesting big stuff (from that insightful look at media mergers to a frightful look at the JonBenet industry, which was the February cover).

It's good because in less than two years it has really pissed off Kenneth Starr and Norman Pearlstine and *New York Times* reporters and Bob Woodward, among others, and that means that it takes on important issues and that big-time people read it and take it seriously and think it is important and try to spin it.

It's good because it always has a fantastic photo or two and then explains how the photo was taken.

It's good because it has just been redesigned, which it badly needed to be, and although the table of contents is ugly the redesign is pleasing and helpful.

It's good because, by and large, it has high standards of reporting. There are no anonymous cheap shots and few anonymous quotes. There are lots of facts and -- except in the pieces by Steven Brill himself -- few opinions. There is a flow to the organization and a rhythm to the writing.

It's good because it raises gossip questions -- and then tries to answer them. (Example: Why didn't *The New York Times* comment to its readers about why Abe Rosenthal was leaving? *Brill's* asked, and got an answer. "It's very hard to cover yourself aggressively," executive editor Joseph Lelyveld told the magazine. "We wanted to pay tribute to Abe's career on the paper and leave it at that." A future story might be: Why is it hard for the *Times* to cover itself aggressively?)

Overall, it has the right mix of substance (a hard look at how some in the press report the facts of second-hand smoke, or don't report them; how the Nielsen ratings work, or don't work; how the stock-pickers at the financial magazines score, or don't score), of style ("There was a time when I was what you might call seasonally uninformed," begins a lovely and typical lament by Calvin Trillin), of sass (a list of the number of corrections per issue in popular magazines), and of silliness ("The 10 New York Media Heavies Hillary Will Have to Overcome; the monthly Pundit Scorecard).

*Brill's Content* was launched in August 1998. The early issues were often dogs -- sometimes barking, sometimes slobbering, sometimes biting you in the ankle, sometimes jumping all over the furniture and sometimes just lying there. But it has grown into a faithful and sleek companion. The pretentiousness and tediousness have been easing since that first, thirty-page "Pressgate" screed by Steven Brill himself, though he was back at it again in October with his "proposals for voluntary restrictions (by the press) that protect privacy."

"We also know -- and knew better after the first issue -- that we have to pay attention to the pacing of everything we write and to the mix of what we offer in each issue," Brill told readers last year on the magazine's first anniversary, an honest if not particularly newsy self-appraisal but one that the magazine is acting on.

*Brill's Content* is, of course, different from the *Columbia Journalism Review* and the *American Journalism Review* in that it is a for-profit business. Or, at least, it hopes to be. So far, it hasn't made money, Steven Brill says, though he expects it to in two years. (The magazine is owned by Brill Media Ventures, L.P., and Steven Brill says that "I control a majority" of that.) The postal statement filed September 30, 1999, listed an average paid circulation

for the previous twelve months of 189,201, with circulation of the issue closest to the filing date at 241,642. Brill says circulation now is 290,000, and he says ad revenue so far this year is up 50 percent from last year. He says the magazine ran 400 pages of advertising last year.

And while Bill Kovach has implied in his ombudsman column that one purpose of *Brill's Content* is "to elevate the standards of journalism," the magazine, unlike *cjr* and *AJR*, is aimed more at a broader audience than just the working-journalist set. It is aimed at anyone who wants to see the machinery and machinations of the press explained and explored and exposed by writers who know what they're doing.

*Brill's Content* doesn't have those personnel notes about editors moving from this city to that one or those classified ads seeking assistant professors for tenure-track positions or those self-congratulatory ads from newspapers that just turned over a stone or two in their hometowns and want to make sure that potential Pulitzer Prize jurors are aware. Rather, *Brill's Content's* ads are for Jack Daniel's or Saturns or Ralph Lauren clothes or first-class travel on British Airways, items that probably are beyond the wishes or budgets of many readers of the other journalism reviews. But not all, as a media salary survey -- that didn't include anyone at *Brill's* -- in the May 1999 *Brill's* confirms.

When readers wrote pointing out that *Brill's* didn't include salaries of its own editors or contributors, editors Brill and Effron wimped out in a statement that only an editor and a lawyer could compose. "First, we generally are uncomfortable reporting on ourselves, because it can appear self-indulgent," they wrote. "Second, obviously we know the salaries of everyone who works here, but we know them only under confidential terms; we did not want to pressure our own people to waive their confidentiality. As for our own salaries, they involve information we have pledged to the other partners in the magazine's parent company to keep confidential." Whew.

That does, though, raise another issue. What information in the latest deal with CBS, NBC and Primedia has been pledged to remain confidential and will thus never be printed in *Brill's Content*?

Clearly, this all bears watching.

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