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Creating a Forum to Rake the Media's Muck

By DAVID FIRESTONE

UNFORTUNATELY for Steven Brill, Content, his planned monthly spyglass on the media universe, won't begin publication until June. By then, it's just possible that the 24-hour coverage of the decade's most squalid political story — the one redefining boundaries between high and low media, the one simply crying out for the detailed hindsight of what he calls "the consumer guide to the information age" — will have died down just a bit.

And so, surrounded by prototypes and mailings trumpeting the advent of media accountability, he has to fantasize.

"I would love to be publishing a March issue, closing in two weeks," said Mr. Brill, the man who invented Court TV and The American Lawyer magazine, in an interview earlier this week. "We could do a diary of four or five people at the center of this — reporters, the White House communications office, maybe a lawyer, and just sort of narrate the events from their perspective."

(Assignment editors, take note. These are freebies.)

"Or," he continued, "I'd like to be in the meetings at Time last week after Newsweek almost beat it. I'd like to be there last night when 'Nightline' was trying to decide how much to make of this Dallas Morning News report. I'd like to trace how a story pops up and pops down. This is what people are interested in."

Not everyone, of course. Mr. Brill acknowledges that some people out there do not share his interest in dissecting the brains of editors and news directors and Webmasters. But he is betting his newfound wealth, and the cash of a few well-known investors, that there are half a million readers who do. And judging by the proliferation of reporting about the media in many national publications, there may well be an appetite for a magazine that goes several steps further.

Such as an article on the 10 laziest White House reporters. A fact check of the year's Pulitzer Prize-winning articles. The fashion magazines that sell out to advertisers. And, inevitably, an "undercover report" from Sam Donaldson's sheep farm.

All these, of course, are proposed articles, as outlined in the magazine's promotional literature mailed to potential readers. (It is unclear who holds him accountable if they are never published.) Not surprisingly, considering the need to drum up attention, the cast of the direct-mail pieces is deliberately confrontational. "Name the industry that, when it comes to power, lack of accountabil-



Steven Brill says his new magazine is the advent of media accountability. Librado Romero/The New York Times

ity, arrogance and making money in the name of sacred constitutional rights, actually makes lawyers look good," said one of the pieces.

THE magazine itself is likely to be more balanced; Mr. Brill said at least half of it would be devoted to praising the publications that do the job right. But its overall purpose is to bring to the world of "nonfiction media" — newspapers, magazines, books, television and the Internet — the same skepticism that he brought to the legal community and that journalists like to believe they maintain about the institutions of government and business.

"Journalists instinctively believe that every other institution that tends to be arrogant and unaccountable to anyone is not a good thing," he said. "And I think the public really gets that about the media in a way that the media doesn't get it."

There have been several attempts to start similar publications over the years, all of which have failed, many for lack of capital. That won't be a problem for Mr. Brill, who made between \$20 million and \$40 million last year when he sold Court TV and The American Lawyer to Time Warner and will himself be putting up the majority of the \$27 million needed to start Content. The rest of the money is coming from Barry Diller, the television mogul; Howard Milstein, of the local real-estate family, and Lester Pollack, a prominent Wall Street investor.

Mr. Brill, 47, who first became concerned about the arrogance of the press when covering Ariel Sharon's

libel suit against Time in 1984, will also clearly have the audaciousness to take on a powerful and notoriously thin-skinned industry. Raised in Far Rockaway, Queens, he began writing for New York magazine and Esquire while in law school, and negotiated the deal to start The American Lawyer at age 27.

At times in his past, that brashness often edged over into bullying; former staff members at his publications recall a temper that could be ignited with the smallest of slip-ups. Mr. Brill says he has since calmed down, and he presumably would be less likely to go off on a prominent staff, including Michael Kramer from Time and Lorne Manley from The New York Observer. Contributors will include Calvin Trillin, Esther Dyson, and Reed E. Hundt, the former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission.

There remains skepticism within the industry about whether even well-paid talent can attract readers outside its insular world, beyond the professional base of publications such as the Columbia Journalism Review. But Joan Konner, publisher of CJR, believes that Mr. Brill can do it if anyone can, and others who have watched him through the years seem convinced that the market is ready.

"Steve Brill is as tough on journalists' ethics as anyone on the planet," said Howard Kurtz, the media reporter for The Washington Post, who plans to freelance for Content. "The idea of holding the press accountable in a monthly magazine could be a really exciting venture that might well fill a vacuum out there."