

Maclean's: tactless tabloid or professional periodical?

Once-classy weekly now caters to lowest common denominator



ADAM
GAUMONT

point

On 14 August, eleven of Canada's top universities (now 14 and counting), including our own U of A, sent a letter to *Maclean's* officially stating that they will no longer provide their academic information for the magazine's annual university rankings feature due to flaws inherent in the system—namely, the lack of uniformity among provincial academic standards and thus of compatibility among university results.

Maclean's has defended its position, pointing out that the universities are being un-cooperative and giving them few alternatives to work with. Nevertheless, such a public disavowing of a once widely respected and widely read (if not official) report is the most recent blow to its rapidly decreasing respectability as a news publication.

The slide started when ex-Edmontonian Kenneth Whyte took over as publisher and editor-in-chief in February 2005. Whyte spearheaded a redesign of *Maclean's* that saw it divebomb from a sober news weekly to checkout-stand rag practically overnight.

Don't get me wrong: in the world of news publications, change is good, and redesigns are a vital part of staying current, effective and informative. And if you ask Rogers Media, owners of the magazine since 1994, *Maclean's* most recent revamping undoubtedly shot sales up through the roof. With tasteful front-page teasers like "Divorce a friend," "Mmmm... Flippers: A tasteful defence of the seal hunt," and "Michael Ignatieff: The first interview with the Liberal heir apparent"—featured on the 10 April 2006 issue, even though the Liberal leadership convention doesn't even take place until December of this year—it's no wonder copies are

now flying off the shelves.

Given the general quality of Rogers' print publications—*Chatelaine*, *Flare* and *Loulou* come to mind—it's not surprising that the media giant wanted to push *Maclean's* in the same direction. And while there's nothing wrong with such popular fluff *per se*, when a traditionally reputable news publication sinks to this level as well, it's troubling not only for the magazine itself but also the state of journalism in Canada generally.

Most troubling than its layout and design, however, is *Maclean's* recent tendency to blur the lines between editorial and advertising content. As pointed out in the March/April 2006 issue of *Adbusters*, *Maclean's* ran features in 2005 on "The New Canadian Establishment" sponsored by Cadillac, breaking the cardinal journalistic rule of keeping advertisements separate from editorial content in the process.

More recently, in its 1 September issue, *Maclean's* let aforementioned Liberal "heir apparent" Michael Ignatieff take the helm and write himself a self-endorsatorial entitled "What I would do if I were Prime Minister." Forgetting for a moment the leaders of Canada's other seated opposition parties, can we assume that *Maclean's* will provide an equal number of self-promoting column-inches to the other Liberal leadership candidates? I haven't seen it yet.

Perhaps the magazine's approximate three million readers won't notice little details like lack of journalism ethics, but they undoubtedly will notice what's on the front cover. And unlike the classy *Maclean's* of old, recent issues blurt out nauseating collages, eye-popping yellow and red banners, and sensationalist headlines.

A quick gander at some of the past few months' cover jobs says it all. My personal favourite: "What really happens in Hugh Hefner's bedroom," an in-depth analysis that came out on 14 August—the same day that the above-mentioned eleven universities sent their letter shunning the magazine's popular university ranking system. Coincidence? Probably. Fitting? Definitely.

Redesign resurrects magazine from quagmire of reader apathy



MATT
FREHNER

counterpoint

The universities' decision to pull their support of the annual *Maclean's* rankings was indeed a blow to the magazine's integrity, and sent a strong message that the weekly must clean up its ratings procedure. However, this admittedly deserved action by the University of Alberta and others isn't the final nail in the coffin of the magazine's credibility that Mr Gaumont suggests. In attacking the magazine's new style, he ignores the question of whether the substance had changed for the better—which it certainly has.

Maclean's went under the knife on its 100th birthday for a number of reasons. Most importantly, it had become one of the worst sellers on the newsstand in Canada, and with a falling subscription base, the magazine was in trouble.

Kenneth Whyte unveiled the new *Maclean's* to mixed reviews. A custom typeface and expertly tweaked leading allowed them to sneak more words onto the page without sacrificing readability, while the photo editing took on a more professional, deliberate look. Detractors claimed that the new design made the magazine nothing more than a trashy tabloid, with its often-irreverent content and sensational, sometimes offensive, headlines and teasers.

Whatever your opinion of the new look, it worked. The magazine was awarded "Canada's magazine of the year" by the 29th Canadian National Magazine Awards. They've also taken readers' input seriously, as evidenced by their new font size and changes to the "newsmakers" page, as well as their movement from a Monday to a Thursday publishing date.

Granted, some of the magazine's covers are a

touch inflammatory. Still, this doesn't speak in any substantive way to the actual *quality* of the articles, but rather the marketing department's desire to sell more issues to keep the publication afloat. Proclaiming it to be "WWIII" on your cover may be alarmist, but it gets people to pick up the issue—after which readers are treated to 15 pages that analyze the intricacies of Hezbollah's presence in the Mideast, from the US' influence to personal experiences of Lebanese Canadians to discussions by a vast array of diplomats and scholars as to why Israel-Lebanon may in fact be the harbinger of WWIII.

This also applied to the article on the Khadr family, which spends eight pages discussing their history and opinions, and serves to provide a lot of background context to the ongoing saga of Omar Khadr, the Canadian accused of killing an American soldier in Afghanistan during his youth and held in Guantanamo Bay for four years without charge—and who's often the recipient of dubious (and, depending on who you ask) alleged legal practices like force-feeding and torture.

These examples aren't the exception, and they do exactly what a good news magazine should: provide context and in-depth analysis of the issues at play in the daily media. If I had to choose between stale content with inoffensive headlines and exemplary analysis with a bit of cheek, I'd go for the latter every time.

Maclean's also features solid political analysis of writers like Paul Wells, John Geddes and Peter C Newman, who together bring a wealth of experience and opinion unsurpassed by any other Canadian publication and which is certainly on par with content in the *Economist* et al.

It's this mix of serious analysis with careful impertinence that makes the new *Maclean's* a weekly staple of mine. I implore you to look beyond the cheesy façade to the tasty analytical innards. Canadians are well-served by this revitalized magazine, which provides a much-needed point of departure for political and social discussion in this country.



U of A Scholarships are the solution!

The Student Awards Office has several scholarship competitions with fall deadlines.

- Each competition has its own set of criteria and eligibility requirements as outlined in the following descriptions.
- For additional information on these and other University of Alberta Scholarships please visit our website www.registrar.ualberta.ca/awards or the Student Awards Office at 1-80 Students' Union Building.

Jason Lang Scholarship

The Jason Lang Scholarships were created in honor of Jason Lang, a 17 year old Alberta high school student who was killed in a school shooting. These \$1,000 scholarships are designed to reward the outstanding academic achievement of Alberta postsecondary students who are continuing into their second, third, or fourth year of studies.

Applicants must be Alberta residents who have achieved a minimum GPA of 3.2 on 24 units of course weight in their previous year of studies (September to April).

**Students can submit their applications on-line at www.registrar.ualberta.ca/awards.
The deadline to apply is 15 September 2006.**

University of Alberta Undergraduate Academic Scholarship Competition

The Undergraduate Academic Scholarship Competition recognizes and rewards students for superior academic achievement (minimum GPA of 3.5) on a full normal course load taken at the University of Alberta during the September to April academic year. Applicants must be returning to full-time studies in September 2006 to be eligible for these scholarships.

There are approximately 300 awards available through this competition. The awards range in value from \$500 to \$4,000 with some being Faculty specific and some open to students in any Faculty.

**Students can submit their applications on-line at www.registrar.ualberta.ca/awards.
The deadline to apply is 30 September 2006.**

Rhodes Scholarship

The Rhodes Scholarship Competition is open to undergraduate and graduate students in any Faculty. These scholarships are tenable at the University of Oxford in England and cover fees, board and lodging, and travel expenses for two years of study. Scholars may follow their own choice of study and are required to attend Oxford in October 2007.

Applicants must be Canadian citizens or living in Canada; have been born between October 2, 1982 and October 1, 1988; and have received an undergraduate degree before attending Oxford (except medical students).

**Applications are available at the Student Awards Office.
The deadline to apply is 1 October 2006**

Undergraduate Leadership Awards

The University of Alberta Leadership Awards Program is designed to recognize those undergraduate students who have demonstrated leadership skills and potential through involvement and participation in university and/or community organizations, sports, and cultural or political activities.

There are approximately 50 awards available through this competition. The awards range in value from \$500 to \$12,500 with some being Faculty specific and some open to students in any Faculty.

**Application forms are available on the Student Awards website at www.registrar.ualberta.ca/awards.
The deadline to apply is 15 October 2006**