'Saturday Night' as a Casualty of the Advertising 'Santa Claus'

By Earle Beattie

If all the words of condolence, wisdom and silly comment on the suspension of publication by Saturday Night were paged up and printed in an 8½ by 11 inch format they would produce many issues of Saturday Night. From October 7 when this 87-year old Canadian magazine folded up until the present, the press and the electronic media have poured forth genuine fears for the future of Canadian Identity if Canadian periodicals are allowed to die and shallow jeers that inadvertently show why we're in the mess we're in.

In the latter category is the predictable sneer of Peter Worthington in the Toronto Sun of October 31. Using the occasion to flex his muscles on how well the Sun is doing while others fail, he wrote: "...Saturday Night, with its patronizing, select, elitist view was out of step with the people. And it deserves to die." Apparently only jingoistic, titillating, superficial papers like the Sun deserve to live.

It is a sad reflection on society and media that so much of our resources and energy, whether pulp-producing forests or creative art in advertising, find their way into mediocre products. The news-stands are littered with multi-colored junk that gets prime display space; tons of second-class mail is carried daily to our doors, exhorting us to buy one more geegaw. Many of them use the finest lithography and letterpress, the best inks and coated paper. Their slick appeals are churned out by talented artists and writers who would rather be working on socially-useful material.

Despite the intensity and breadth of the debate on Saturday Night's demise, creeping Americanism via Time and Reader's Digest and Cultural Sovereignty, one basic issue has been missed. It was as though nobody wanted to talk about it - or such a thought had become Unthinkable in our consumer environment.

I refer to advertising - not the lack of it, but too much of it. Mass Media have become so utterly dependent on advertising it is inconceivable that they can or should be financed in any other way. Life and death for magazines, newspapers, radio and television hang on how much money the medium can attract from the ad agencies. All through the debate on
Saturday Night runs out of miracles, a victim of economics

Reader says Time's claims are nonsense

Goodbye, Saturday Night — You saw your doom ahead
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Saturday Night it was a fundamental and unchallenged assumption that a "good" magazine was one that could pull in quantities of advertising and as Saturday Night didn't get enough advertising to keep afloat it wasn't a very good magazine. Opinion, democratic discussion, poetry and reviews of the arts depend on the vulgar irrelevancy of underarm odour.

In fact the exact opposite exists almost as an axiom of audience studies: the higher the circulation, the lower-grade the content; (e.g. Reader's Digest as pablum for the millions); the lower the circulation, the higher the quality. Thus, in pushing circulation upwards to attract more advertising there must be wider appeal to meet the increased common denominator of readers. That means becoming more conservative and reinforcing the prejudices of the unthinking. Choice of articles, fiction or poetry must change to more popular types and must be short; language must be scaled down to less sophisticated levels; artwork, layout and the use of color must be souped-up to catch the eye of the reluctant reader who needs enticement to get him started. In short, the quality magazine goes out the window to make way for a more "attractive" but less thoughtful product.

Like every rule or axiom there are exceptions, but invariably they all relate to advertising in the industrial state. Newspapers, magazines and other media die through planned corporate juggling, through mismanagement, lack of promotion, shifts in public taste, the entry of new media forms such as television, unfair competition, monopolistic practices, changes in editorial policy, increased costs and other factors. And some small media are inferior. Perhaps the most peculiar reason for failure ever given was that of the Edmonton Bulletin when management declared it died from "success". Circulation had increased to the point where a new press was needed and, with new capital costs to pay, the paper would not be profitable because it could not get that much more advertising, or so they said.

Even big-circulation magazines perish when advertising lags or does not increase sufficiently to meet rising costs and profits. Most instructive on this question was the life, death and resurrection of the Saturday Evening Post. When the bugle sounded for the last Post on February 8, 1969, after 148 years of publishing, the magazine had tried every stratagem known to business managers and editors in the Magazine Survival Kit. For most of its years, the Post had pleased Middle America with fiction on the style of Tugboat Annie plus some better material,
e.g. by Faulkner and Dreiser. In the non-fiction field, articles were descriptive pieces and chauvinistically U.S.A.; editorials were anti-social. Then the Post found its faithful flock of readers was no longer young, no longer in the market to buy cigarettes, tape-recorders, cars, boats and portable TV-sets its advertisers were pushing. Campbell's soup perhaps. Advertising lineage dropped by four-fifths between 1950 and 1968 and the magazine lost millions. So the Post tried pseudo sophistication, intellectuality and at one point, about 1960, some profundity entered its pages with an "Adventures of the Mind" series including essays by Arthur Miller, Graham Greene and John Hersey. Five years later the Post turned to the expose form with articles on the Mafia, the CIA, the war in Vietnam and the sexual revolution, and it was actually a bit ahead of the U.S. public in demanding a bombing pause in Vietnam.

The Rural Route boy had come into the big city, slavering for attention with such articles in its final issue as "Anybody Want To Buy Chicago?" and "Soul Music - Where It All Comes From," to say nothing of naughtier pieces like "School Is Bad For Children" and "The Second Coming Of Synanon." But the new instant Post turned out to be a Midnight Cowboy with the after-image of the hitching post and village drugstore still clinging to it despite the change.

In its death throes, the Post had also carried through one of the most astonishing maneuvers in the history of mass media. In July, 1968, it got rid of three and a half million readers, dropping circulation from six and a half million to three million. If you were a mail subscriber living in Pumpkin Junction you were no longer eligible to receive the magazine. Your subscription was peremptorily cut off and you were assigned to other publications. The message was" get lost, you're a nuisance, we don't need you, dear reader, BECAUSE YOU DON'T BUY THE GOODS ADVERTISED IN OUR MAGAZINE." On the other hand, if you lived in a city of considerable size, the computerized demographic-income-age operation considered you a prized subscriber. You were young, urban and presumed not to be poor. Bill Emerson, the Post's final editor, rationalized it all this way"We are editing for more urban, sophisticated and better-
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educated readers...now we can be blunter, hit harder, make more demands."

The real reason for throwing over those three million readers, was not that the Post, in a spirit of enlightenment, wanted to speak up boldly on social issues but wanted what advertisers call a "target audience." The metropolis with its Playboy, Playgirl and Consmopolitan boys and girls, nicely packaged in high-rises, its young marrieds in split-levels, the jet-set, the Pop-Art people, the Pepsi Generation were easy spendthrifters and easy to reach. Advertisers could aim accurately at that target; they were a concentrated market. Contrarily, the subscribers in the villages, small towns and on the country roads are widely dispersed with varying tastes and, growing old, were not as consumption-minded. So it was out with the Trogloidytes, in with the McLuhanites.

All this is to say that the Name of the Game for mass media is Advertising. Its hypnotic influence is so great that even expert media men said that the Post failed because its readers went thataway. In the Post's case it was clearly the advertisers who left - at least in terms of what might have been without TV. Incredible that six million people want to buy a magazine and that isn't good enough.

While Saturday Night suspended publication because it had too few readers in the perception of ad agencies for that kind of mass market, the Saturday Evening Post went broke because it had too many of the wrong sort. Reasons for the rise and fall of magazines often rest on the whims of the ad people, and circulation is not the only criterion. The Post became more liberal before it expired, but several years before that another magazine, The Reporter, became more conservative and died. In both cases, the old readers thought they were better dead than read.

Sometimes it is a question of too much and too late. Back in the 50's, Colliers improved a good deal in content and had begun to increase its circulation when it went under. Alas, ad contracts had been written for a year in advance and the magazine received no extra money for the higher circulation which cost more to service. As a final irony, two and a half years after the Post died, it was resurrected as a nostalgia quarterly to enlist that old audience which had been discarded and back came the Norman Rockwell cover, Tugboat Annie, Alexander Botts, writer Pete Martin, reprints of old Post covers,
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the long-discarded outline type for titles and such uplifting articles as "Pat Nixon Was My Typing Teacher." The formula to cut costs was to appear quarterly and use old material that had been paid for in the 20's and 30's, adding a bit of new stuff. There were 62 advertisers, a press run of 500,000. Out of the ashes rise the ashes.

Despite varying reasons in all cases, all have one thing in common: advertising called the shots on whether the magazine should live, die, go into limbo or resurrect. Once a helpful adjunct to the financing of media, advertising became their life-blood. From the days of the penny press to the present it has gradually dominated media, big and small. In daily newspaper offices, the advertising dummy sheets arrive first, occupying 60 percent or more of the space, determining the size of the paper for that day; then the editorial people fill in the spaces between. Only a few pages are spared from ads, others are so overwhelmed that news layout is impossible and the whole paper becomes an obstacle course in search of news. Often, some of the "news" (e.g. stories on fashions, real estate) is disguised advertising.

Magazines are similarly dominated by advertising. One perceptive writer, Marya Mannes, appears like a prophetess now in looking back at what she said in 1962. Commenting on "the price we pay for our newsprint, our television, our information and entertainment" she wrote:

"It is a question which our mass magazines in particular had better ask themselves and which this particular reader suspects is at the root of their troubles. In their ferocious competition for advertising space, they may find themselves gaining revenue but losing readers. Can you be equally magazine and market, or is there a point at which the market is more than the magazine."

Ms. Mannes surveyed Life, Look, the Saturday Evening Post -- all of which have gone under since she wrote. She found that Life's ad ratio had risen from six percent in 1937 to 50 percent in 1962, changing it from an enjoyable magazine with some breath-taking picture spreads to a cramped, cluttered, ad-distracting excuse for a mag. And just to confirm her forecast, the magazine she was writing for, The Reporter, was soon to collapse.

Yet the shrillest accusation against Saturday Night for
its "failure" is that it did not attract enough readers and therefore enough advertising. In other words, all magazines must be "mass" magazines if they are to survive and gain our approval. One critic, an assistant professor in the University of Toronto's faculty of management studies, Martin Murenbeeld, expressed this view on the Toronto Star's Insight Page of October 16, when he wrote: "I submit that Saturday Night's problems were not lack of advertising revenues, but lack of consumer appeal. Its circulation is poor; business recognizes the facts for what they are and so does not rush at the opportunity to advertise." Apart from the fact that this non-sequitur is mind-boggling (The magazine has no lack of ads, but lacks appeal and therefore has a lack of ads) it should be noted that Saturday Night did in fact have a substantial circulation for a quality magazine: 70,000 paid-up subscribers not including readership from borrowed copies. The Canadian Forum has 7,500, a proportionate equivalent of The New York Review of Books (75,000). Encounter (politics, the arts) has only 25,000 subscribers, The New Statesman only 61,700 and the thought-provoking U.S. magazine, Commentary, has only 62,400. The New Republic in the U.S., drawing on a possible audience 10 times greater than Canada, has 97,500 circulation and the long-established (1857) Atlantic Monthly has only five times the circulation, proportionately half the circulation of Saturday Night. I submit that Saturday Night had a healthy circulation, but not being in the privileged position of Time which has most of its editorial content paid for in the U.S. and which is protected by Canadian law against competition from Newsweek, it had the same insurmountable difficulties as other quality magazines. It could not be compared with mass magazines.

Prof. Murenbeeld sees magazines primarily as vehicles for advertising. While he thinks that a government subsidy is acceptable, he would limit its duration and confine it to those magazines that have "audience appeal" and as Prof. Murenbeeld thinks 70,000 isn't an audience we are back in the old bag of "mass" media being the only media worth supporting. It is, in fact, the non-mass or less massive media that need support from the government, foundations or private donors and even if, or especially if, they don't grow big. These are the periodicals that weave the Canadian tapestry, express Canadian identity and provide diverse opinion while the ad-clogged media tend to reinforce the status quo, make people comfortably apathetic and sell soap. CBC-Television is a prime example of a medium that tried to go the big-audience way and the ad way while nearly losing its role as a medium for big AND small audiences, minority views, quality programming and Canadian emphasis.
The decision of CBC-Radio to phase out commercials is a wise one, especially as they amount to only 13 cents per person annually. Except for certain programs CBL may never compete in Toronto with stations like CFRB which has mainstream audience appeal; but for substantial audiences, CBL in Ontario and CBC across Canada, will be preferred for enlightened broadcasting. Continuing subsidy is required and in greater amounts.

Subsidies are inevitable for small, struggling magazines and for the "in-between" select magazines like Saturday Night which can never hope and should not be driven to achieve mass appeal. The only cut-off point for subsidy should be solvency and that may first require a Canadian renaissance. Some magazines may wish to stay out of the advertising game entirely or to hold ad content to a minimum.

One of the unpalatable facts of life for magazine editors today is that they must enter into consumerism whether they like it or not, promoting products that are irrelevant to or actually in conflict with their editorial content. The editorial imperative becomes, "Join the Waste-Makers, the Status-Seekers and the Motivational Researchers; forget the Limits to Growth despite the global population explosion, inflation, upset ecology, depletion of resources, starvation in many countries and poverty in the affluent society."

Many magazines, big and little, have not gone out of business for lack of readers, but lack of brightly-hued pages extolling deodorants, chewing gum, beer, a new car every year, fashions suitably changing every year, ad nauseum.

In addition to the destruction of editorial content and the social effect of consumerism, advertising has had one other effect: it has made us all believe that media come from Santa Claus. We have come to think that radio and television programs are "free" with thanks to the advertiser. But the advertiser never pays; he puts those huge sums spent on huckstering his products into the price of the goods and the public pays. And of course it pays more for all that repetition and clutter. A striking example was the way, a few years ago, California voters turned down "pay TV" after corporate propaganda dinned the idea into their heads that "nobody should have to pay for television."

The same occurs in print media, but here the reader directly pays a small fraction of the cost. Advertising pays a great deal more. Again, translate "the advertiser pays" into
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the reader pays indirectly by buying the product. That measley ten, fifteen or twenty cents you put out for a daily paper, perhaps a little more on Saturday, is a ridiculously low sum for news and views of the city, province, nation and world - as poor as it often is.

Magazines are paid for in the same way and the whole picture is complicated by the fact that everybody pays a little more for the goods to cover the cost of advertising but not everybody buys the goods. This means readers who are non-buyers are being subsidized by buyers who may or may not be readers.

I am not suggesting that all advertising should be eliminated from mass media. Some media must serve as a marketplace for goods as well as ideas, but not in that volume with that financial and social cost, that pounding repetition, that clutter, bad taste, misinformation, seduction of the child, absorption of human and natural resources, and that premium to the big corporations over small companies in hawking brand names of no superior merit. The ads cannot be allowed to take the role of the Camel in easing the Arab out of his tent a la Aesop's fable; they ought to be kept in their place which is at the beginning or end of programs on private stations, on the left hand pages of newspapers or grouped at the end of sections, and at the "back of the book" or inside covers of magazines. More importantly, not all magazines should be forced into the marketplace as mere adjuncts of the industrial state. They need subsidy and the public needs a rest from the cacaphony of commercial messages.

Ideally, readers, listeners and viewers would pay the full shot for adless media as they will soon for CBC-Radio and perhaps CBC-Television. But for many media the price would be too high as people have been conditioned by "free" or low-priced media and many can't afford a direct payment of 60 cents a day for the Toronto Star or three dollars an issue for a magazine. For them and for the sake of all the other values, we return to the need for subsidy from the government, the Canada Council, the Arts Council of Ontario, from Business (with no strings and no conditions attached) and from other sources.

Still other devices can be used for the nurture of Canadian media. When Ottawa can tax-write off 100% of costs for oil exploration, all of it for U.S.-owned corporations, to say nothing of other subsidies, the way can be found to revive Saturday Night - and not for Nostalgia.