

MASTHEAD

THE MAGAZINE ABOUT MAGAZINES

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By SCOTT BULLOCK

Blind spot

What does the *National Post* have against Canadian magazines anyway?

Is it just me, or has anybody else noticed that the *National Post* is pimping for American magazines? I've noticed, but before I proceed to cast stones allow me to declare my biases.

I'm an American, and I'm proud to declare my allegiance to the country of my birth. I subscribe to the *National Post* as my primary daily newspaper, and I think it's an excellent read. I work for Coast to Coast, a distributor of both Canadian and American magazines. I embrace the notion of the importance of Canadian magazines in telling Canadian stories.

Finally, I also believe in a free market, and that Canadian readers have a right to unlimited access to magazines from anywhere and everywhere. Enough said and now on to my beef with the *Post*.

First, consider the empirical evidence gleaned from the *Post's* very own pages. This past December, I clipped any magazine-related articles that caught my eye and tossed them into a file folder. Here's a sampling of my findings:

- Dec. 1: a pick-up from the *Boston Globe* about *George* magazine, post-JFK Jr.
- Dec. 3: a puff piece on Tina Brown as celebrity, effectively promoting *Talk*, *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker*.
- Dec. 4: a full-page, four-colour feature on the New York-based feminist magazine *Bust*.
- Dec. 9: a half-page, four-colour piece on San Francisco's *Schwing*, the "hip new magazine" for young golfers.
- Dec. 18: a four-colour feature in the "Arts" section on *Cosmogirl!* and other U.S. teen magazines (there was a brief mention of Toronto-based *Reluctant Hero*).
- Dec. 20: an article pumping *Time's* "Person of the Year" issue.

The volume of stories promoting U.S. magazines was absolutely overwhelming, and often very positive. Inversely, there was virtually no coverage of Canadian magazines. And remember, this came from just one month of monitoring. From what I can see, though, such bias has been the norm with the *Post* since its launch (think of the abysmal coverage of Bill C-55 and the split-run issue). Even at the time of this writing, in fact, I picked up the *Post* only to find a lengthy profile of *Cosmogirl's* editor-in-chief.

Now let's back up a bit. Magazine and newspaper professionals sell the value of the print medium in communicating an advertiser's message to its readers. Advertisers spend money

hoping to generate sales of their particular products or services.

Likewise, publishing professionals and public relations firms know the power of the printed word with respect to editorial content, and how articles can motivate readers to make buying decisions. It's understood that "objective" editorial can be very beneficial.

These are basic market realities. So the question is: why does the *National Post* run so much ink promoting American magazines, American culture and American values when it is engaged in a war for the hearts and minds of Canadian readers? What might motivate the *Post* to so shamelessly promote American magazines?

I've come up with four possible answers:

- PR people repping American magazines are more effective than Canadian publishers at presenting themselves to *National Post* editors.
- The *National Post* competes with Canadian magazines for readers and advertisers.
- The *National Post* is engaged in some kind of conspiracy to Americanize Canada.
- The *National Post* thinks Canadian magazines suck.

I called *National Post* media reporter Murray White to explore these potential reasons

for his paper's U.S.-heavy coverage. Murray was a very nice guy on the phone. First off, he denied that PR hacks have any influence whatsoever. (But hey, what else is any self-respecting journalist going to say?)

As for the business of competing for Canadian eyeballs and advertising dollars, Murray admitted he knew very little about the dollars and sense of publishing, so an obvious conclusion would be that there is no cynical monetary motivation on the *Post's* part.

Regarding the Americanization conspiracy theory, Murray denied it with a good-natured and utterly believable chuckle. He said that his only bias is for stories that are "newsworthy," although he did admit a "taste for celebrity."

As for my final possible conclusion, that the *National Post* simply thinks Canadian magazines suck, Murray was safely circumspect. "Some do," he said. "Some are very good." If that's the case, hasn't the time come for the *Post* to start giving this industry much more balanced coverage? I, for one, certainly think so. ■

Honorary Canadian Scott Bullock is vice-president communications and publisher services for Coast to Coast Distributing Company.