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THE PUBLIC EDITOR

## Can 'Magazines' of The Times Subsidize News Coverage?

By [BYRON CALAME](#)

~~A PERFUME critic? Yes, The Times now has one. Chandler Burr's Scent Strip column appears in the high-gloss [T: The New York Times Style Magazine](#), where the often-fluffy lifestyle coverage is a world apart from the kind of journalism in the daily sections of the paper.~~

~~T: Style's perfume critic — like the advertising-driven concept for the glossy new real estate magazine — is part of The Times's calculated effort to create new content and publications that will attract additional advertisers. The redesign of most of the paper's existing weekly sections, such as [Travel](#) and [Dining](#), has given them a magazine-like flair intended to increase their appeal to advertisers.~~

~~"We don't put out a daily newspaper; we put out a daily newspaper plus about 15 weekly magazines," Bill Keller, the executive editor, reminded the news staff at a meeting late last year. "Some of them are actual magazines. But a lot of them, although they're printed on newsprint, are still — in format, in conception, in design — are magazines."~~

~~The ubiquity of the magazine-like sections snapped into focus for me a few weeks ago when I discovered that Times editors had decided not to distinguish between opinion and straightforward news in weekly sections. As I noted in an earlier column, an editor told me the reason for that decision was "because the contents of these sections consist mainly of features that go beyond what we call 'straight news.'"~~

~~Newer Times sections, including [Escapes](#) and [Thursday Styles](#), have been in the magazine-like mode from the get-go. And there are indications that at least some new ventures aren't necessarily launched because editors perceive that readers need them. Talking to his Times colleagues in advertising in March, Mr. Keller noted that some new ventures "exist in large part to generate advertising revenues."~~

~~Basically, Mr. Keller has turned big chunks of The Times over to magazine-like content in the expectation of generating increased advertising revenue to ward off cutbacks in the daily sections' core news coverage. The industrywide slump in newspaper advertising has already forced significant cutbacks at some metropolitan dailies and several dozen buyouts in the Times newsroom in the past couple of years.~~

~~Mr. Keller candidly acknowledged the fundamental trade-off in answering a question at a meeting with staffers last November, the transcript shows. "Well, the reason why we're inventing these sections, I think, is obvious: They generate the revenues that help subsidize the stuff that drew most of us into the business."~~

~~For me, and probably for many consumers of serious news, the major question posed by this proliferation of~~

~~magazine journalism is what it means for The Times's core news coverage. Protecting the core coverage remains "the first priority," Mr. Keller said in an interview Thursday. As he had contemplated, he said, part of the increased advertising revenue from the "magazine" part of The Times is being used to support the daily news coverage.~~

~~Some of the increased advertising revenue from the "soft" sections, as they are often referred to in the newsroom, has gone to bolster the metro staff by replacing reporters who had volunteered for duty in Baghdad, Mr. Keller said. The Times used some of the money to beef up the Washington bureau as it geared up for coverage of the 2006 and 2008 elections.~~

~~Mr. Keller's comments about protecting the "core news report" have been especially strong and unhedged during his twice-a-year exchanges with the entire news staff, at what he calls "Throw Things at Bill" sessions.~~

~~The core news report, as Mr. Keller defines it, is the work of the foreign, national, metro, business, sports and culture staffs that fills most of the daily sections of The Times. "That's the inner wall of the castle," he said at a November session with all staffers, according to the transcript. "We've got to protect those [staffs]."~~

~~Asked about possible job cuts, Mr. Keller was even more resolute. "We're not going to downsize the core news report of the paper," he vowed, according to the transcript. "I mean, I see that as something that's red-circled." He called the core news report "our greatest pride."~~

~~Mr. Keller has acknowledged two ongoing challenges in sorting out the role of the "magazine" part of The Times. One is making sure the articles are "done to a high standard," he told me Thursday. Last November, he said, "If we're going to produce more of these things that are not in the category of our core mission, they've got to be good."~~

~~The other involves Mr. Keller's call for "balance," and convinces me he truly values core coverage. If the magazine sections are generating advertising revenue to support "a really high-class culture department, then I'll feel like things are in balance," he said. "If all we're doing is adding more stuff that's value is more in entertainment or is more aimed at how we consume than at the vital aspects of how our readers live, then I'm going to be worried."~~

~~Although this is a risky venture with the reputation of The Times on the line, I think Mr. Keller's trade-off to protect the core coverage in the daily sections makes sense. The many Times readers who are consumers of serious news — including those who complain to me from time to time about frivolous articles in the magazines — should be heartened by Mr. Keller's commitment to serious journalism.~~

### Banking Data: A Mea Culpa

Since the job of public editor requires me to probe and question the published work and wisdom of Times journalists, there's a special responsibility for me to acknowledge my own flawed assessments.

My July 2 column strongly supported The Times's decision to publish its June 23 article on a once-secret

banking-data surveillance program. After pondering for several months, I have decided I was off base. There were reasons to publish the controversial article, but they were slightly outweighed by two factors to which I gave too little emphasis. While it's a close call now, as it was then, I don't think the article should have been published.

Those two factors are really what bring me to this corrective commentary: the apparent legality of the program in the United States, and the absence of any evidence that anyone's private data had actually been misused. I had mentioned both as being part of "the most substantial argument against running the story," but that reference was relegated to the bottom of my column.

The source of the data, as my column noted, was the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication, or Swift. That Belgium-based consortium said it had honored administrative subpoenas from the American government because it has a subsidiary in this country.

I haven't found any evidence in the intervening months that the surveillance program was illegal under United States laws. Although data-protection authorities in Europe have complained that the formerly secret program violated their rules on privacy, there have been no Times reports of legal action being taken. Data-protection rules are often stricter in Europe than in America, and have been a frequent source of friction.

Also, there still haven't been any abuses of private data linked to the program, which apparently has continued to function. That, plus the legality issue, has left me wondering what harm actually was avoided when The Times and two other newspapers disclosed the program. The lack of appropriate oversight — to catch any abuses in the absence of media attention — was a key reason I originally supported publication. I think, however, that I gave it too much weight.

In addition, I became embarrassed by the how-secret-is-it issue, although that isn't a cause of my altered conclusion. My original support for the article rested heavily on the fact that so many people already knew about the program that serious terrorists also must have been aware of it. But critical, and clever, readers were quick to point to a contradiction: the Times article and headline had both emphasized that a "secret" program was being exposed. (If one sentence down in the article had acknowledged that a number of people were probably aware of the program, both the newsroom and I would have been better able to address that wave of criticism.)

What kept me from seeing these matters more clearly earlier in what admittedly was a close call? I fear I allowed the vicious criticism of The Times by the Bush administration to trigger my instinctive affinity for the underdog and enduring faith in a free press — two traits that I warned readers about in my first column.

*The public editor serves as the readers' representative. His opinions and conclusions are his own. His column appears at least twice monthly in this section.*

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