Media mogul brought his readers to Life

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Launched in 1923 by two young Yale graduates, Briton Hadden and Henry Luce, Time Magazine supplied information to busy middle-class professionals in a style that was condensed, lively and opinionated. Six years later, Hadden died and Luce became editor-in-chief. With the addition of Life, Fortune, and (much later) Sports Illustrated to the portfolio of Time Inc., he re-invented magazine journalism in an age of specialization. By the late 1930s, only William Wrigley had his name printed on more pieces of paper.

Alan Brinkley, a professor of American history at Columbia University, provides a splendid account of Luce's life and times. Admired — and feared — Luce didn't exercise nearly as much power as he wished, Brinkley reveals. His opposition to Franklin Roosevelt had virtually no impact on public opinion, politics, or policy. His obsessive campaign to increase support for Chiang Kai-Shek and Nationalist China was ineffectual as well. Increasingly unable to control the content of his publications, Luce often complained about finding himself "to be the little man who wasn't there."

Luce was most influential, Brinkley demonstrates, when he promoted ideas that were emerging among a broad swath of the American population — that the United States should intervene to defeat the Nazis and after the war accept its responsibility to reshape the world.

His greatest legacy, of course, was his role in creating new forms of communication at a moment in which the mass media was rapidly expanding. Brinkley is at his best in capturing that moment. Time's disciplined brevity, vivid (and sometimes invented) language, reliance on borrowed sources, and omniscient voice, he indicates, made the magazine easy to lampoon. Dwight MacDonald might complain that Time "gives us something to do with our minds when we aren't thinking." Nonetheless, Brinkley points out, the magazine drew millions of readers into subjects they might otherwise have overlooked.

Life appealed, Brinkley writes, because it was likable, cheerful, complacent, and tolerant. To Luce, and to Life, the United States was not "dominated by difference, division, and exclusion." Poor people and minorities "were very much like other Americans — goodhearted, sharing a common dream, and doing the best they could."

Luce retired in 1964 and died three years later, amid the first signs of eroding profits at Time Inc. The company was beginning to pay a price, Brinkley indicates, for Luce's resistance to diversification, his indifference to the emergence of television as a source of news, and the growing preference of advertisers for periodicals pitched to more narrowly focused interest groups.

Luce would have been upset by declining revenues for Time, Fortune, and Sports Illustrated, devastated by the demise of Life in 1972, and perplexed by the decision of his successors to launch People magazine. We can only imagine his response to the merger of his company with Warner Entertainment in 1990.

Ironically, for a socially awkward, shy, and lonely man, Luce's greatest success, Brinkley concludes, was in creating magazines that fostered the illusion of an intimate relationship with their readers. That achievement lives on, for better and worse, in technologies and techniques that Luce, no doubt, would have loathed.

The Publisher

*Henry Luce And His American Century*

Alan Brinkley
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