



Henry Luce and Twentieth-Century Consumer Culture

William R. Childs

Alan Brinkley's *The Publisher: Henry Luce and His American Century* (2010) led me to ask the question, Why are Henry Luce and Time Inc. not more central to the modern America narrative and the concerns of business and consumer culture historians? Brinkley's biography suggests how the journalist's life was connected to many themes in modern U.S. history. Business and consumer culture historians could connect Luce and his firm to the American consumer culture by focusing on the publisher's business model and management style, how he and his magazines interacted with intellectuals who criticized the consumer culture even as they participated in it, and how both the news and advertising content of Time Inc.'s magazines sold the notion of modernity.

Introduction: The Biography and Connections

The arrival last year of *The Publisher: Henry Luce and His American Century* inspired me to revisit my interests in connecting business history to cultural history.¹ Reading Alan Brinkley's biography prompted me to investigate a question I had long had but had not investigated: Are there not numerous connections between Henry Luce and Time Inc. and the American consumer culture? I will focus on a few of those connections here and suggest other intersections that should be developed further. In a way, I am looking at Henry Luce not as a biographer, which Brinkley did very well, but rather as a business and cultural historian interested in

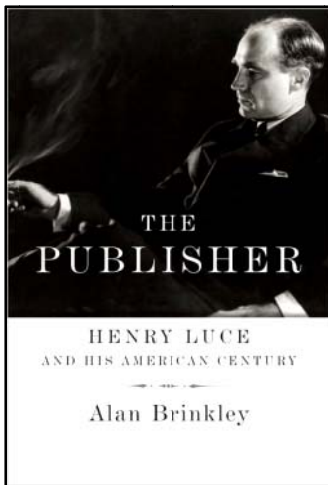
¹ Alan Brinkley, *The Publisher: Henry Luce and His American Century* (New York, 2010). See also James Baughman, *Henry R. Luce and the Rise of the American News Media* (Baltimore, Md., 1987, 2001).

William R. Childs <childs.1@osu.edu> is professor of history at The Ohio State University.

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using Luce and Time Inc. to illuminate and enrich the narrative of twentieth-century America.²



As he always does, Brinkley let the sources shape his approach. In *The Publisher* he crafted a readable, critical, and empathetic if not sympathetic story of a man in his times.³ Brinkley's story-telling sustained my suspicions that during his life and after his death Henry Luce was misunderstood and mischaracterized by many.⁴ Much of what we thought we knew was true, of course, but Brinkley's presentation brings an admirable balance to previous studies of Luce and the publishing empire he created.⁵

Brinkley's biography also led me to conclude that I would not want to have dinner with Henry Luce. That I would not engage in conversation a man who understood the emerging consumer culture and over four decades produced profitable magazines might seem odd. Yet it was Brinkley's singular achievement that his biography elicited from me a deep sense of respect and an equally deep sense of dislike for Henry Luce. What I would be interested in discussing—Luce's business plan, his intuitive sense of the consumer economy, his ability to attract

² Robert T. Elson, *The World of Time Inc.: The Intimate History of a Publishing Enterprise*, vol. 1: 1923-1941 (New York, 1968) and vol. 2: 1941-1960 (New York, 1973), and Curtis Prendergast, *The World of Time Inc.* (New York, 1986), are considered "business history," but other scholars have not had the same access as these authors to the primary sources, until Brinkley was granted access for *The Publisher*. Ralph W. Hidy, "Business History: Present Status and Future Needs," *Business History Review* 44 (Winter 1970): 486n7.

³ Brinkley has written award-winning books, but he is also an essayist with a distinct voice. See, for examples, Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York, 1982); "Writing the History of Contemporary America: Dilemmas and Challenges," *Daedalus* 113 (Summer 1984): 121-41; and "Why Steinbeck's Okies Speak To Us Today," *New York Times*, 18 March 1990, Arts & Leisure section, 13. For a convenient list with clickable links of mostly positive reviews of the book, see *The Lit Review* on-line at <http://www.thelitreview.com/the-publisher-by-alan-brinkley.html>.

⁴ Baughman, *Luce and News Media*, 260-61; Brinkley, *The Publisher*, 456-57, summarizes the Left's disdain for Luce. See notes below for more mischaracterizations.

⁵ Two insights Brinkley revealed were that Luce focused on African Americans with a respectful view (if not always bereft of racist language) beginning in the 1920s and continuing to his death in 1967, and that he was not a supporter of Senator Joe McCarthy. See Brinkley, *The Publisher*, 134-35, 420-21, 42, 215, 216, 234-35, 360-61. Readers of Elson might be less surprised by his attack on McCarthy; see Elson, *World of Time*, 2: chap. 18, "Confrontation with a Well-Known Demagogue," 269-80.

top-flight talent in writers and photographers whose ideologies clashed with his and his readers' ideologies—probably would not have been topics of interest to him.

Alas, they have not been topics of serious scholarly enquiry either. Historians have not integrated Luce and his publishing empire into studies of business and the consumer culture. Most of the works on Luce and Time Inc. have been focused on media and journalism history, and those have not been integrated, except in a few tentative ways, to the consumer culture.⁶ Why this aversion to linking Luce to the consumer culture is a topic for another time.⁷

I believe Henry Luce should interest business and consumer historians more than he has. I am taking the history of the middle class seriously (as did Warren Susman) and suggesting that understanding Luce's relationship with the American middle class and consumer culture could be helpful in connecting business history and consumer economy to broader considerations of modern U.S. history.⁸ Brinkley did some of this in *The*

⁶ There are only a few works that connect the publisher and his empire to the consumer culture: Bradford R. Collins, "Life Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists, 1948-51: A Historiographic Study of a Late Bohemian Enterprise," *The Art Bulletin* 73 (June 1991): 283-308; Wendy Kozol, *Life's America: Family and Nation in Postwar Photojournalism* (Philadelphia, 1994); Erika Doss, ed., *Looking at Life Magazine* (Washington, D.C., 2001); Andrew L. Yarrow, "The Big Postwar Story: Abundance and the Rise of Economic Journalism," *Journalism History* 32 (Summer 2006): 58-76. In reviewing Kozol's book, Doss asserted: "*Life* was an important cultural entity and deserves far more scholarly attention along the lines of Kozol's persuasive critical analysis." See Doss, review of Kozol, *Journal of American History* 82 (Sept. 1995): 827 (quotation). James Baughman, *The Republic of Mass Culture: Journalism, Filmmaking, and Broadcasting in America since 1941*, 2d ed. (1992; Baltimore, Md., 1997) deals generally with television's impact on journalism.

⁷ As with the consumer culture, perhaps so too with Henry Luce. Serious scholarship on the consumer culture emerged only in the 1970s and 1980s, in part, as Lawrence Glickman has suggested, because of general antipathy toward capitalism and consumption on the part of intellectuals and historians. Lawrence Glickman, "Born to Shop? Consumer History and American History," in *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*, ed. Lawrence Glickman (Ithaca, N.Y., 1999), 7-9; Brinkley, "Writing the History of Contemporary America," 128 and 140n18. See also Jackson Lears's review of *The Publisher*, "The Gospel According to Luce," in *The New Republic* (8 July 2010), 21-29.

⁸ Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1984). See also Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *American Consumer Society, 1865-2005: From Hearth to HDTV* (Wheeling, Ill., 2009). Walt Disney is another twentieth-century entrepreneur who has not been a serious topic of business historians, even though cultural historians have battled over his contributions for decades. See the following: Steven Watts, "Walt Disney: Art and Politics in the American Century," *Journal of American History* 82 (June 1995): 84-110; Blaine McCormick and Burton W. Folsom, Jr., "A Survey of Business Historians on America's Greatest Entrepreneurs," *Business History*

Publisher, of course, but the genre of the biography cannot do it all, as he himself has noted.⁹

I want to emphasize here a few themes from Brinkley's biography that relate to Luce and Time Inc.'s interaction with the consumer culture. I will look first at Luce as entrepreneur and business manager. I will then sketch how he and his magazines interacted with various groups of intellectuals and artists during the middle decades of the twentieth century and suggest that this interaction probably shaped the consumer culture in ways that we have yet to uncover. In the third section, I will assert that there is a link, as yet unexplored, between Henry Luce and his magazines and the "missionaries of modernity" in advertising—the admen who created the ads that appeared in Time Inc.'s publications. I will conclude with a brief discussion of the elephant in the room: How do we measure the influence that Luce and Time Inc. exerted on the consumer culture and the wider political-economic culture?

Luce as Entrepreneur and Business Manager

As I read the biography I realized that Luce was a classic American character—a man with the self-improvement focus of Ben Franklin and Horatio Alger heroes (with the curious exception of dressing to impress), the singular mindset of Eli Whitney, Henry Ford, and Michael Dell to create and deliver products that fit the times, and the vision of Andrew Carnegie and Edward Land to see beyond the obvious—in short, the classic American entrepreneur. His opportunistic stint as an agent for a tailor, which paid his expenses for most of his second year of college, belies his denials that he was an entrepreneur. So, too, do his and co-founder Briton Hadden's efforts to use their Yale contacts to fund the early months of *Time Magazine* (how that echoes the life of Eli Whitney!). Luce reluctantly emerged as the business manager of *Time Magazine* (Hadden simply would not do it), and his efforts made the enterprise profitable.¹⁰

Luce and Hadden understood that the emerging middle class of industrializing America desired access to news of the day that was comprehensive and could be read quickly; they wanted to be connected to the modern world but did not want to waste time reading different newspapers and magazines. The founders developed a leadership style that commanded editorial employees to cover the stories they wanted and to write those stories the way they wanted them written. After Hadden's death, Luce sustained the approach and repeated the process to create

Review 77 (Winter 2003): 703-16. Interestingly, Disney is listed here, but Luce is not.

⁹ Brinkley, "Writing the History of Contemporary America," 122.

¹⁰ Harold Livesay, *American Made: Shapers of the American Economy*, 2d. ed. (New York, 2007); Horatio Alger, Jr., *Ragged Dick and Mark, the Match Boy* (New York, 1962); Brinkley, *The Publisher*, 61, 94ff, 104-5; Alan Brinkley, interview, OAH Meeting, Washington, D.C., 9 April 2010, accessed at <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/293026-6> (13 Feb. 2010).

Fortune (1930), *Life* (1936), and *Sports Illustrated* (1954). Luce defined the concepts and spared no expense in development and early publication efforts. His intuitive placing of the right person in the right job at the right time often ensured success, even as his inability to fire underperformers did not prove disastrous. His concept for *Life* pushed the technical limits of publishing photographs, and when presented with a new kind of paper from a supplier, he understood the opportunity it presented for his plans to transform photojournalism.¹¹

In short, Luce possessed the entrepreneurial, managerial, and leadership skills (along with the quirks) of those manufacturers that business historians know so well—Carnegie, Alfred Sloan, Pierre du Pont, Henry Ford, et al. Luce was not manufacturing a good, but he was furnishing a service (similar, perhaps, to Charles Merrill in the stock market).¹² Business historians might discover that Luce was an important managerial transitional figure bridging the second and third industrial revolutions.

Henry Luce shaped *Time*, *Fortune*, *Life*, and *Sports Illustrated* to attract readers (customers) from the emerging white middle class of modern America. He celebrated this class, which at various times has been labeled The Establishment and The Greatest Generation. In that celebration, of course, Luce embarked on his mission to convince Americans that their nation was an important force in the world. *Fortune* focused on one sector of the middle class, the business managers, and zealously promoted a form of corporate liberalism that recognized not only that American business represented the most advanced state of capitalism, but also that American business had responsibilities to the broader economy in the way it treated customers and workers.¹³ Luce's missionary zeal to serve and uplift the American middle class suggests comparisons to other businessmen such as George Pullman, Henry Ford, Bruce Barton, and Sam Walton. Exploring through business and consumer culture history how he was similar to and different from these businessmen could prove enlightening.¹⁴

The missionary theme also undergirds comparisons between Luce and groups within his generation, groups who had interesting ties to the emerging consumer culture.

¹¹ Brinkley, *The Publisher*, 210-12, passim.

¹² Livesay, *American Made*, chap. 11, "And So It Goes . . . Burgers, Bargains, and Bytes," 257-301; Edwin Perkins, *Wall Street to Main Street: Charles Merrill and Middle-Class Investors* (New York, 1999).

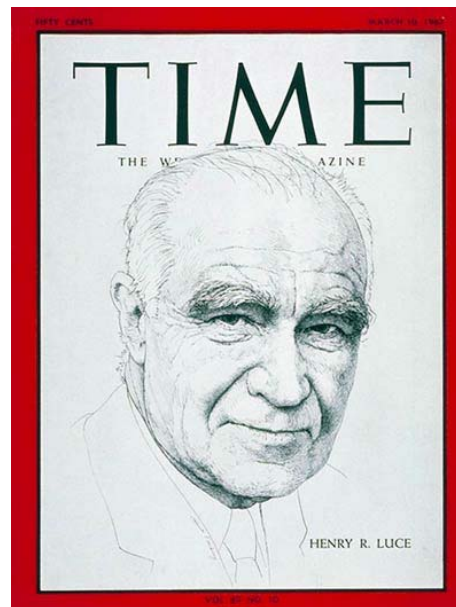
¹³ Brinkley, *The Publisher*, chap. 6, "Empire Building," especially 168-70.

¹⁴ See for Pullman, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/INCORP/pullman/town.html>; Livesay, *American Made*, chap. 6, "The Insolent Charioteer: Henry Ford," 141-61; Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009).

Luce and His Generation

Henry Luce was a member of the generation that produced several distinct groups that have garnered scholarly attention: the Lost Generation of the 1920s; Abstract Expressionists (New York School); the public intellectuals of the middle twentieth century; and, the advertising men of Madison Ave. Luce was not a member of any of these groups, although he had intriguing ties to all of them through his educational background and publications. I focus here on the Lost Generation, the Abstract Expressionists, and the public intellectuals to indicate how much more we need to know about Luce and his intersections with American cultural topics and their connections to the consumer culture. I focus on the advertising men in the next section.

Luce was fascinated with the very culture that repulsed the Lost Generation and other critics of the 1920s—corporate America, the modern age, the consumer society—and he successfully published a magazine, *Fortune*, that supported—not uncritically—the very corporate giants that the artists and intellectuals attacked. At first sharing in part the attitudes of H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis, *Time* questioned the lack of taste in the consumer culture. After Brit Hadden’s death, though, Luce encouraged his magazines to “lift up” the values of the middle class, to celebrate and educate. (That included criticism of such literary stalwarts as T. S. Eliot and James Joyce.) While Luce held a complicated relationship with the American middle class, unlike the Lost Generation artists and their cohorts at home, he used his magazines to educate rather than to ridicule. This divide demands more study.¹⁵



The Luce magazines reflected their founder’s interest in the modern age and its emphasis on architecture and photography and the arts more generally. How much do we know about this intersection and how it shaped and reflected the emerging middle-class consumer culture of the mid-twentieth century? Not all that much. And some of what we know is wrong, as Bradford Collins has noted: “. . . *Life’s* essentially positive attitude toward the modern tradition being developed by the New York School has also been consistently misrepresented by its historians, both early and recent.” Collins’ 1991 essay reveals a general anti-Luce, anti-

¹⁵ Malcolm Cowley, *Exile’s Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (1934; New York, 1994); John Dos Passos, *The Big Money* (1933; Boston, 1991); Brinkley, *The Publisher*, 153-58, 129-31.

Time Inc. attitude that has misled us in understanding the full impact of the publisher on mid-twentieth-century painters; Collins' work should be replicated to reveal the breadth and depth of Time Inc.'s emphases on American political, social, economic, and cultural topics.¹⁶

Supporting this plea is this tantalizing sentence, which appears in Russell Jacoby's *The Last Intellectuals*: "Even Henry Luce of the *Time*



magazine empire, often denounced as a master propagandist, employed and even liked mavericks and dissenters." Brinkley and others have noted the curious fact, but without further analysis, that Luce hired some of the "mavericks and dissenters"—the "public intellectuals"—to write for *Time*, *Fortune*, and *Life*. These included Daniel Bell, William H. Whyte, John Kenneth Galbraith, James Agee, and Dwight Macdonald. Jacoby shows in part how these writers' roles in promoting civic engagement changed

as the modern academic culture supplanted that of the public intellectuals during the mid-twentieth century.¹⁷ What role did Luce and Time Inc. play in this transformation of the civic culture? Did Time Inc. co-opt the public intellectuals and pave others' paths to academic respectability and economic security?¹⁸

In a related vein, we might answer the question, What role did the Luce magazines play in introducing the broad middle class to mid-twentieth century artistic values? Could they have contributed to (or were they reflective of?) the general movement across America to support the arts (symphonies, regional theatres, ballets) in the 1950s and 1960s?¹⁹ In another sense, I am asking if Jackson Lears's assertion—" . . . Luce's magazines manufactured the cultural consensus (or the belief in it) that characterized the mid-century decades . . ."—is defensible.²⁰

Luce and Advertising

One of the questions that a business and consumer culture historian would have after reading *The Publisher* is, What was the relationship between the

¹⁶ Collins, "Life Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists," 284 (quotation).

¹⁷ Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (1987; New York, 2000; Kindle edition), 2383 for quotation, chap. 4, section I generally; Brinkley, *The Publisher*, 153-58, 327; Lears, "The Gospel According to Luce," 22.

¹⁸ See Robert Vanderlan, *Intellectuals Incorporated: Politics, Art, and Ideas Inside Henry Luce's Media Empire* (Philadelphia, 2010).

¹⁹ See NPR's "American Stages" at <http://www.npr.org/series/4522910/american-stages> (last accessed 15 Feb. 2011), for an overview of the mid-twentieth-century "Regional Theatre Movement."

²⁰ Lears, "The Gospel According to Luce," 22.

advertising and the news that appeared in the magazines?²¹ As Roland Marchand has shown, the advertising men of the 1920s and 1930s, those who staffed the ad agencies that created a new industry focused on the consumer economy, promoted the products their agencies represented as new and modern; they instructed the consumers on what it meant to be modern. They used existing techniques—the gossip columnist, the personal endorser, scientific authority—to sell the products as necessary in the modern world.²² Luce refused to use these specific advertisers' techniques to present the news; still, given the publisher's attempts to promote modernity, was there not some connection between the news and the advertisements in his magazines?²³

I have discovered one suggestive glimpse into this relationship. Robert Elson includes in his business history of Time, Inc. a long section of a memo Luce wrote with regard to “the nexus between The Editorial and The Advertising” in *Life's* “Modern Living” department. Here Luce straddles the fence:

. . . If we really want a ‘philosophical unity’ we have got to get one which does not pretend that the advertising does not exist.

[The main moral problem] is . . . that advertising powerfully directs and concentrates the attention of the reader on material satisfactions. . . .

Concretely, it is the first job of Modern Living to show how the multiplicity of goods in an industrial age can be used with relatively better rather than relatively worse taste. . . . Being so deeply involved in the contemporary, *Life* can't, for example, refuse to have anything to do with clothes if it thinks that contemporary fashions, as a whole, stink. But it can, without becoming hopelessly eccentric, choose the less bad among the bad and, with a combination of subtlety and earnestness, try to point the way out of a period of bad taste (in anything) toward good taste.²⁴

Like the advertisers, Luce was also selling modernity—his definition of modernity.

²¹ Brinkley indicates at several points in *The Publisher* that advertising revenue mattered for *Time*, at least in the early years; see 109, 122, and 123-24 especially.

²² Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley, Calif., 1985). Marchand asserts that the “therapeutic role” of the advertisers was not conscious but rather “emerged as the cumulative by-product of individual merchandising strategies that proved successful in selling products” (360). This contrasts with Luce's conscious missionary zeal.

²³ Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*. The sole reference to *Time* in this book appears on page 67, where Marchand notes the magazine's “contempt for tabloid ‘heart-advice-departments’ and [its refusal] to dilute its news content with ‘a multitude of features dedicated to Mr. and Mrs. Moron and the Little Morons.’” See 378-79n47.

²⁴ Elson, *The World of Time Inc.*, 2: 190. For other ruminations by Luce, see John K. Jessup, ed., *The Ideas of Henry Luce* (New York, 1969).

Luce earned his fortune in part by selling advertising space in his magazines. The obvious tie between the “missionaries of modernity,” as Marchand labeled them, and the missionary zeal that Luce brought to his style of journalism has not, to my knowledge, been adequately explored. How did the advertisements underscore or contradict the news included in Time Inc. magazines? Scholars could use Marchand’s approach (basically, an intense content analysis) to uncover those relationships. Surely there must be some connection between the news content and the advertising copy? Did Time Inc. exert any control over advertisements? Did the advertising department work with clients to place ads near related stories? Access to the archives would be required, of course.²⁵

Conclusions: The Problem of Measuring Influence

To this point, I have argued that business and consumer historians should focus more than they have on Henry Luce and Time Inc. to better reveal connections to business history, to intellectuals who criticized the consumer culture, and to the selling of the modern world through advertisements. There are two criticisms of this approach, however, that must be acknowledged. First, Time Inc. was not the only media of the middle twentieth century. In addition to other magazines, there were local newspapers, radio, and television. What makes Luce worthy of special attention? Second, a consensus suggests that Luce and his magazines did not exert the influence on readers that he desired. Instead, as Brinkley and James Baughman have argued, though Luce affected the industry of journalism, he did not really change people’s minds; at most the publisher and the corporation reflected what the middle class was already thinking. Baughman is even more critical when he argues that *Life* has become a darling subject of scholars from the boomer generation, despite the fact that it was read by a minority of Americans.²⁶

The totality of Brinkley’s *The Publisher*, along with the connections I have made here, suggest that these criticisms can be overcome.

As for the first concern: We need to extend the insight that Time Inc. altered the landscape of magazine publishing to recognize the wider

²⁵ See Jonathan Augustus Silva, “The Development of American Marketing Thought and Practice, 1902-1940” (Ph.D. diss., The Ohio State University, 1998), and Pamela Walker Laird, *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing* (Baltimore, Md., 1998) for insights into how advertisers worked with manufacturers to manage new products. For an interesting connection between Luce and the business corporation, see Roland Marchand, “*Life* Comes to Corporate Headquarters,” in Doss, ed., *Looking at Life Magazine*, 123-37. For acknowledgement of the access issue, see Barry Shank, “We’re a Happy Family: Me, Mom, and Daddy,” review of Kozol, *Life’s America*, in *American Quarterly* 48 (Sept. 1996): 534.

²⁶ Brinkley, *The Publisher*, 457-58; Baughman, *Luce and News Media*, 197-98. James Baughman, “Who Read *Life*? The Circulation of America’s Favorite Magazine,” in Doss, ed., *Looking at Life Magazine*, 41-51, especially 48.

impact of the firm on American culture. That its most popular magazine, *People*, emerged after Luce died is fascinating, given how much that publication does not reflect what the founder believed. Yet, it and a hundred more magazines emerged from the publishing firm that he had crafted. Using the insights of business history, we should connect the founder's values with those publications and the evolving consumer culture.²⁷

As to the second critique: We should not become strangled by the influence-reflection dichotomy. Here the historiography of consumer culture might release us, for it has focused in part on the recognition that working-class aspirations to achieve middle-class values and middle-class aspirations to achieve upper-class values have been continuing threads in the narrative of the consumer society. Just because *Life* was read by a minority of Americans does not mean that it had no impact on others who "merely looked at the pictures." An even stronger argument, perhaps, is to recognize that there was an evolution in American consumer culture that paralleled the rise of Time Inc. Regina Lee Blaszczyk has noted that "American consumers shifted from emulating their 'social betters' to expressing themselves."²⁸ Surely business history—style investigations and content analyses of the magazines would indicate whether or not Luce and his publishing empire interacted with this shift? Surely the magazines had an opinion!

²⁷ Brinkley, *The Publisher*, 455.

²⁸ Baughman, "Who Read *Life*?" 48 (first quotation); Blaszczyk, *American Consumer Society*, 269 (second quotation).