

Israeli Culture

How to Put a Legendary Magazine Back on Its Feet

David Remnick, editor of The New Yorker, turned around the financially failing magazine using an inner compass: what interests him was sure to interest his readers.



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David Remnick, editor of The New Yorker, probably has a magic formula. The success of his weekly magazine may be termed a miracle. But Remnick does not look like someone who holds any great business secret in his heart. He looks ordinary, relaxed, alert and simple. As if that is what he is: No more than a young, athletic journalist, age 47, who edits a probing and elegant magazine that is 81 years old. Not a big deal.

Except that the magazine in question churns out content each week that impatient readers in the so-called Internet age are presumed to be unable to digest: Probing, lengthy (at times 10,000 words) articles, fine literature, selected poetry, reviews of art exhibitions or of historical biographies, clever columns and sophisticated, refined illustrations. There are barely any articles about celebrities. There are very few photographs. The format is rather rigid. The style is at times highbrow and always superbly intelligent. This magazine has no journalistic style of the sort that tries to attract young and frenetic and impatient readers, or to appease the advertisers.

Nevertheless, under Remnick's editorship, The New Yorker not only survives against all odds, but even earns profits. Not long ago, for the first time in the life of the magazine, it

surpassed the one-million-reader threshold. How did it happen?

The meeting with Remnick, at which an attempt was made to explore this subject, took place this week at the American Colony Hotel in Jerusalem. Remnick came to Israel and the Palestinian Authority to write an article about the Hamas movement in the wake of its electoral win. This in itself is a quite rare event - since becoming editor of *The New Yorker* in 1998 ("The only editing job I had before this was my school newspaper"), Remnick has written only infrequently. It's a shame, because before becoming editor of the prestigious weekly, Remnick had a brilliant writing career, at first at *The Washington Post* and then, beginning in 1992, at *The New Yorker*. He won a Pulitzer for his book "Lenin's Tomb," which he wrote following a four-year assignment as the *Post's* Moscow correspondent. Among other things, he also wrote a book about the life of Mohammed Ali. And he also wrote, or mainly wrote, countless reportage and portrait articles.

Israel is the second subject, after Russia, that interests Remnick - and to a large extent *The New Yorker*, as well - in the world outside the United States (Esther, Remnick's wife and the mother of his three children, has a sister who lives in Jerusalem; he himself comes from secular Jewish roots, and has no relatives here). Among other things, Remnick has written articles about Natan Sharansky, Shimon Peres and Mahmoud Abbas. Remnick's most reverberating article about Israel was without question the one he wrote about Benjamin Netanyahu in 1998. Remnick succeeded in getting exclusive interviews at the time with Netanyahu's father Benzion, and with David Bar-Ilan, who depicted Netanyahu and his wife, Sara, in a very uncomplimentary light.

Remnick is taking advantage this week of one of his two short annual vacations from *The New Yorker* (a double-length issue is published twice every year) in order to write about the changes taking place in the Palestinian Authority.

"I am doing it because it helps me stay in the world," says Remnick, explaining his choice to write articles from the field in his precious free time. "The work of editing mainly is one of reading, and of encouraging the writers to put their best work out there and to give them a sense of confidence," he says. But he makes it clear that you do not have to go out into the field to be a good editor. Remnick mentions the legendary editor of *The New Yorker*, William Shawn, who served as the magazine's editor for 35 years, and who practically never set foot out of the city. Tina Brown, who edited *The New Yorker* in the 1990s, was rooted mainly in the New York nightlife. Remnick simply has an abiding love for journalistic writing.

Delving into details

The depth – that is, the delving into details, and the prolonged, comprehensive and multi-layered familiarization with the subject of the article – is one of the outstanding attributes of articles in *The New Yorker*. And this is the mystery, because in most of the world's better newspapers and magazines, budgets are now being cut in order to survive competition from internet journalism and television. The deep, probing investigative pieces, which require time and money, are the first to be hurt and fade away.

Remnick says that writers on *The New Yorker* staff – most are salaried members of the editorial board and not freelancers – may at times work on a single article for six

months. And they earn very handsome salaries. "But I expect good in-depth work for the good pay," he notes.

How is an article that appears in The New Yorker different from a similar article that might appear in a serious newspaper like The New York Times or The Washington Post?

"The difference has to do with depth, with the delving into details, and the writer's voice - the conventions of writing are different. A writer for The New Yorker enjoys more freedom and individuality."

Your writers are more apt to write in the first person.

"Absolutely. Why would I be against writing in the first person? But the big question is, have you earned the right to write in the first person? It's a huge issue. What I don't want is writing of self-centered writers of the sort of 'I heard that Hamas won the election and I cried, or I laughed, for a whole week.' That isn't interesting. There are a lot of forms of involved journalistic writing that are not narcissistic."

Remnick says that the trademark attribute of The New Yorker is the insistence on accuracy.

"When I go to interview, for example, Sheikh Naif Rajoub, one of the leaders of Hamas, I go with a translator, because I do not speak Arabic. I don't want to record too much, because that is double the work. I write pretty fast, and I know what to omit. But that's okay. Because afterward, at the office, our Arabic fact checker - a very talented Lebanese-American woman - will call Sheikh Rajoub and go over it with him, fact after fact. She will ask, 'You said that you will never recognize Israel - is that true?' And he will confirm or refute. 'Is it true that you were born in 1948?' 'Is it true that you have three children?' Every fact found in my

article is checked and confirmed. As editor of the magazine, it is embarrassing to be caught with mistakes, and I hope that there will not be any, but I feel very good when I know there is someone checking up after me."

In other words, every person interviewed by The New Yorker by necessity has to be interviewed twice, once with the reporter and a second time with the fact-checker?

"Yes, absolutely. And media-savvy interviewees feel confident because of this. It gives them the feeling that they can speak freely, and that their words will be presented precisely."

Remnick notes that if interview subjects deny to the fact-checker quotes appearing in an article, the quotes will not always be immediately invalidated.

"If Henry Kissinger, for example, denies that he was involved in bombing Cambodia, we will not rush to edit that fact out of the article," he smilingly notes. (In spite of recurrent denials, the former U.S. Secretary of State was recently exposed by the American media as having been responsible for many actions perpetrated by the United States around the world, which have been termed "war crimes".)

The New Yorker's fact-checkers - "about 20 young employees in their twenties, who specialize in a variety of fields and who care" - make the magazine unique as it relates to what has recently become a burning issue in American journalism: over-reliance on unnamed sources, a hot subject in the wake of The New York Time's failure in its coverage of the war in Iraq, due to reliance on unnamed administration sources who claimed that Iraq was in possession of weapons of mass destruction.

"Seymour Hersh writes about intelligence for us," says Remnick, "and he often quotes from sources without attribution. But as editor, I know exactly who each of these sources is. And the fact-checkers will speak with the sources and will ascertain that they stand behind the words. When Hersh speaks with a source, he will ask him if he is willing to speak with the fact-checkers."

And in this way The New Yorker's readers can be sure that the reference to a "highly-placed source" is not charlatanism or deceit?

"Yes, but in terms of the readers, it is still very problematic, and I most certainly prefer to attribute quotes by name. This is not always possible, however. Without unnamed sources we would not have had Watergate."

Does the fact-checking department of The New Yorker guarantee that what happened, for instance, to The New York Times in the Jason Blair affair (the reporter who was fired after it was revealed that he systematically fabricated articles) will not happen to you?

"I would like to think that the fact-checking department of The New Yorker would be an obstacle to this kind of deception. But we know that Jason Blair was very clever and very crazy. Someone like that could do damage to any publication. I wouldn't want to sound cocky."

Back in the black

The New Yorker, which started in February 1925 and hit its most profitable period in the 1960s, began losing a lot of money in the 1980s - with the rise of television culture - and deteriorated further in the 1990s, during the tenure of Tina Brown, who tried to put the magazine back on its feet by making it more glitzy, more Hollywood. Remnick, a diligent

reporter who lacked any previous experience as an editor, succeeded in reviving the magazine and brought it back into black ink.

What is the formula?

"It has more to do with a thousand little details than any one factor that I could think of. A little cut in the budget, and a little increase of the number of subscribers, which enabled us to raise prices for advertisers."

But you didn't try to change the line of the magazine, to appeal to young people, to make the texts more shallow, to relate in some way to the new reading era, which is now taking form as a result of the internet revolution. Some critics charge that under your stewardship, The New Yorker has in fact returned to a conservative editing line - in terms of the style - not unlike that of the William Shawn era.

"My principle in the magazine - and I am not being arrogant - is that I don't lose sleep trying to figure what the reader wants. I don't do surveys. I don't check the mood of the consumers. I do what I want, what interests me and a small group of editors that influences the way of the magazine.

"I know in my heart that an article like the one that will appear in the double issue next week - about the threat of nuclear war between India and Pakistan - may attract fewer readers than the humorous article by Nora Ephron in the same issue. But if I only run the humorous piece - we have lost our way."

But isn't there a discernible conservatism about the magazine, at least as it relates to the selection of the writers who publish short stories and the poets who publish their poems? It seems as if you frequently publish the works of only well-established authors. For instance, there will be a

story in the upcoming double issue by the successful Japanese author Haruki Murakami, and poems by Seamus Heaney and Mark Strand (as well as a translation of the poem "Lying on the Water" by Dalia Rabikovich). Does the magazine's commercial/business carefulness come at the expense of young and new authors, poets and illustrators who are unknown?

"In certain areas, we are becoming a nearly exclusive commercial stage for publication - mainly in the area of poetry and illustration. The Atlantic, which moved from Boston to Washington, no longer publishes fiction. It is hard when you publish one story and two poems a week - and you, for instance, get a yet unpublished poem by Elizabeth Bishop - to prefer a new poet over it. But we make an effort. And several times a year we publish special issues for first-time literature. I hope that in the course of a year we also uncover a few new authors."

Are you immune to the hysteria that has attacked the quality print journalism around the world in the past few years, the fear of losing readers and losing the right to exist?

"There are problems of newspapers that don't apply to magazines. News magazines should definitely be investing more heavily now in their Internet editions. But insofar as magazine reading, well, we have a big country. Nearly 300 million people. There are enough other opportunities, in other newspapers and magazines, to read about celebrities.

"We are unique, and I know in my heart that we have a big and very serious market for what we are giving: Depth, humor, and if I may add, beauty. And I am referring mainly to literature and poetry. There are enough people that want this. In spite of everything we are being told about the death

of reading, I am convinced that we are not at all close to exhausting this market."

According to Remnick, there is, then, justification for high-quality journalism that makes it possible to linger, to probe and to refine. But it has to be written in English (in other words, the only way to enable the existence of such a magazine in Hebrew is evidently to encourage the mass natural growth of Hebrew readers from well-to-do economic classes). At the same time, Remnick says that in the long run, The New Yorker will also have to invest further in a Web site.

"There is already a migration from the world of cutting down trees and print journalism to electronic reading," says Remnick. "But in the meantime, it seems obvious to me that this magazine, which I hold in my hand and leaf through, is still much more beautiful and desirable."