Legacy in the Making

THE NEW YORKER

In 1925, The New Yorker *magazine began its life by illustrating the cultural experience of living in New York City and delivering its stories with wit and style. Over time, the publication evolved by reporting on culture and current events with a broader worldview, and by adding notable works of fiction and serious journalism to its pages. John Hersey, Rachel Carson, Dorothy Parker, John Updike, and Truman Capote represent just a few of the famous names who have contributed to the publication over its nine decades. Today, in an environment where mobile apps, online publishing tools, and social media channels have democratized the field,* The New Yorker *is on a mission to protect and raise the level of the craft: to not just fill space with more content, but to fill lives with more stories that matter. Recently, The Legacy Lab™ had the privilege to speak to* ***Lisa Hughes****, the Publisher and Chief Revenue Officer of* The New Yorker*, about the mission that she and the leadership team are on. Here, she details how they aren't just relying on established equity to claim a position of journalistic and cultural significance, they are instead taking new action to add to the iconic brand's enduring legacy.*

Today, *The New Yorker* is one of the most famous names in the world of publishing. Can you tell us a little about the magazine's roots?

■ *The New Yorker* was founded in New York, in 1925, as a humor publication that cost 15 cents. It began life as a magazine in the middle of the Jazz Age. Harold Ross, who became famous as its first editor, was the visionary force behind it. He partnered with Raoul Fleischmann, who was best known for founding the General Baking Company. Fleischmann didn't know a thing about publishing. The two made for an interesting combination of founder and financier.

Early on, *The New Yorker* mostly meandered along. It was not until the Second World War that it matured journalistically and started to find its footing financially. In this period, *The New Yorker* transformed from a lighthearted magazine into a sophisticated publication with deep reporting and exhaustive fact-checking—hallmarks that still characterize the brand today. There is a quote from Ross that captures the spirit of the brand, and one that we reference all the time. He said, 'If you can't be funny, be interesting.' The DNA of this magazine, rooted in being an interesting voice in the cultural conversation, remains strong while, at the same time, the types of conversations we participate in have greatly expanded.

In the beginning, *The New Yorker* was New York–centric. We are in New York. We are called *The New Yorker*. We put New York on our

cover from time to time. Since the 1940s, though, with the publication of 'Hiroshima'—John Hersey's landmark 1946 report on the bombing and its aftermath—for example, we have grown far more global in our outlook. We tackle foreign affairs, politics, technology, art, music, books, and so much more. We love New York City, and New York is still a central character in our Goings On About Town section. We have simply expanded outward from our cultural center.

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I think the scope of the conversation is, partly, what makes *The New Yorker* so fascinating. When David Remnick, the editor of *The New Yorker* since 1998, reflects on the state of the magazine, he often talks about the courage it took to get it off the ground. David says, 'Imagine re-pitching the magazine concept today: It's going to have 10,000-word essays, poetry, cartoons, and fiction. It's also going to have politics and tech and culture. We are going to draw the cover.' People must have said back then, just like they might say today, 'You're absolutely crazy, this will never fly.' But here we are, with the largest circulation in our ninety-one-year history.

For me, personally, I grew up in one of those households where we were all great fans of *The New Yorker*. My mother, at age eighty-five, is still an avid reader. The publication has deep meaning for me. It is the pinnacle of journalism, and working here is a job that I had long wanted. When I was named publisher, in 2009, it was important to me to build on the institution—to not only sustain it, but to grow it, and God forbid, not screw it up.

From an editorial perspective, who is *The New Yorker* written for, and as the times have changed, how, if at all, has the publication's audience changed?

■ There's another famous saying attributed to Ross, '*The New Yorker* is not edited for the old lady in Dubuque.' Setting language from the past aside, we are happy to have anyone from Dubuque—or Austin or Asheville or Tokyo—who wants to read and subscribe to *The New Yorker* as part of our community. We are happy to have any reader who appreciates great writing and engaging ideas. Editorially, we say that *The New Yorker* is for people who are switched on. It's for people who are culturally aware, who go out to live music, the theater and films, and read voraciously. It is a publication for people who are educated, who congregate in urban centers, and who are citizens of the world.

Our circulation is expanding into new places. Eighty percent now come from outside of New York. Our largest new growth segment, in print and online, is among millennials. For this next-generation reader, social media has proven to be incredibly important for *The New Yorker*. If the old way to learn more about a person was to glance at the magazines and books on their coffee table, Facebook is the new coffee table. This is one area in which the brand is shining because, for our fans, signaling that 'I read *The New Yorker*' has become shorthand for saying, 'I am smart, cultured, worldly and have some depth.' *The New Yorker* is strong social currency for a new generation.

As a point of pride, while publishing platforms have evolved, circulation has become more dispersed, and audiences have become younger, we have never dumbed down our writing in pursuit of expanding the *New Yorker* brand. We publish on a wide variety of topics, and we always want our readers to feel that what they've just read is the very best thing they're going to read that day, that week, even that month. The focus on people who appreciate compelling writing and ideas—and accuracy—is timeless.

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The New Yorker has established many highly recognizable brand hallmarks. From an insider's perspective, what are some of the most cherished hallmarks?

■ From an insider's perspective, I can share that it always starts with the reporting and writing. We care deeply about those things. The copy-editing, the word choice, the polish to the prose, the fact-checking is legendary for a reason. Everything is done with clear intention. When I joined, I asked David Remnick to share the pillars of the publication with me. The first thing he talked about was the focus on accuracy, the rigor of reporting and finding beauty in the language to tell more interesting and worthwhile stories.

Our magazine covers are another strong hallmark of the brand, and they're a form of social commentary. They are like holding a mirror up to the world. In recent decades, particularly during the era when Tina Brown was the editor, and now under David Remnick, you can look at any cover, from week to week, to know exactly what people were thinking and talking about. And everyone has his or her favorite cover. Many cite the cover that signaled the end of the Defense of Marriage Act—the one that depicts Bert and Ernie, from Sesame Street®, cuddling on a sofa and watching an old-fashioned TV showing the nine Supreme Court justices. Many love the 'Purple Rain' cover we ran as a reflection on the death of Prince. In addition to the subject matter, the choice to use illustrations, drawings, or paintings, versus photographs, helps us achieve a unique look and distinct feeling. Recently, we created an augmented-reality experience that was triggered by the front and back covers. Technology has helped us push the bounds of our storytelling.

Our cartoons are another signature element. Many people will tell you they first fell in love with *The New Yorker* because of the cartoons. One of the advantages of having been around for ninety-one years is that so many of our current readers were introduced to the publication by their parents through the cartoons. That same ritual of sharing the cartoons, as a way to encourage reading the magazine, has happened with my children. Everyone has a favorite cartoon, and they're easy to relate to. And because they are relatable, people love to share them. David and Bob Mankoff, our cartoon editor, do an amazing job of bringing in new talent so that we stay contemporary with the art as well as the social commentary. Today, between the magazine, our website and our apps, there are so many ways that people can enjoy *The New Yorker* cartoons. It's the most modern old thing.

Our font is another distinctive, and important, feature of *The New Yorker*. While we have made some changes to our magazine's fonts, including introducing Neutraface, our famous Irvin font is still ever-present. Named after our first art director, Rea Irvin, the font has a real character and whimsy to it. The Irvin font instantly signals 'this is from the voice of *The New Yorker*.' It is equity that, despite its age, continues to grow.

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Can you share a little about Eustace Tilley, the iconic character who appears on the cover of the first issue, and the ways in which he continues to live on for fans of _The New Yorker_?

■ We love Eustace Tilley. He was created and drawn by Rea Irvin and appeared on the first cover of *The*

New Yorker on February 21, 1925. Eustace is a dandy with a top hat and a monocle. He was drawn ironically, by Irvin, as a send-up of Victorian-era values. Over the years, the Eustace character, like the Irvin font, has evolved to remain an important icon for the brand.

For our ninetieth anniversary issue, Françoise Mouly, our art editor, commissioned nine artists to help reinterpret Eustace as a triple cover on every magazine. As a subscriber, you wouldn't know which combination of three you would get until your issue arrived. We had a Eustace smoking a giant spliff, a female Eustace, a black Eustace, and a Eustace leading a pack of other Eustaces. One cover depicted nine Eustaces, one for each of our nine decades.

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From time to time, we hold a contest where readers are invited to submit their interpretation of Eustace. Through their eyes, we have seen some highly inventive interpretations: Eustace as inspired by Picasso or John Singer Sargent, Eustace as a New York City subway map, and even a Bert Eustace. This dandy from 1925 is a recognizable face, who has evolved to remain completely modern for fans of *The New Yorker*.

As you reflect upon your impact, and the successes of the current editorial and publishing teams, what are you most proud of when it comes to bringing *The New Yorker*'s past forward? And how did you help to achieve those successes?

Collectively, I think our biggest success has been the translation of *The New Yorker* brand across so many different platforms. As a complement to the print magazine, we also produce a series of live events, The New Yorker Festival and The New Yorker TechFest, several podcasts and a national radio show, "The New Yorker Radio Hour," a television program on Amazon Prime Video, apps and, of course, our website, newyorker.com.

Core to our success is that we have engaged new talent who understand emerging formats. There is no way we could have successfully evolved by focusing only on the print medium in our current media landscape. For example, for our podcasts and radio show, we partnered with WNYC, who are experts in the production, direction, distribution, and sales of the format. To be successful in translating your brand into new places and spaces, I think you have to be honest about what you know and what you don't know, and then partner or staff up accordingly.

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I am particularly proud of how we have found a way to grow our footprint while staying true to our brand's DNA. The quality of our podcast and radio show, hosted by David, is outstanding. Online, on newyorker.com, we fact-check and copy-edit, which is not usual in the space. The quality of our online content has been reflected in the success of our paywall. After reading six stories online every month, readers are invited to subscribe—and they do. To have earned such a loyal following, on top of achieving audience growth, speaks to the quality of the journalism we provide.

I think what works well here at *The New Yorker* is how the divisions—

editorial, business, and consumer marketing—all work so closely together. We are constantly asking one another: What business are we in, and what business do we want to be in? How do we want to get there? And how can we monetize our work in a way that stays true to our journalistic DNA? All those things have to come together, starting with making decisions that come from who we authentically are as a brand.

Earlier, you mentioned *The New Yorker* created an augmented-reality cover. Can you tell us a bit more about it, including how innovation and experimentation fit into your overall brand narrative?

■ Our recent augmented-reality experience represents the first time in the history of *The New Yorker* when we have executed a visual story across both the front and back covers. We aimed to experiment with an innovative technology in service of the storytelling. There is an expectation among our readers, and ourselves, that our storytelling will be engaging and immersive, as well as informative. And since many view our content on mobile devices and tablets, we took the opportunity to add some more interactivity to that experience through A.R. technology.

In terms of the viewers' experience, they are drawn into the journey of a woman who enters and exits a subway. After she boards the train, you visually travel through the 'O' in the title of *The New Yorker* and are transported from a one-dimensional view, to a 2-D, animated view. Combining technology with our iconic illustration, an entire cityscape leaps off the page.

A few years ago, the great David Hockney illustrated a series of *New Yorker* covers on an iPad®, which you could replay over and over to see his every brush stroke. Many of our covers have been turned into GIFs. Christoph Niemann, the artist behind the A.R. cover, recently did a 360-degree animation on the cover celebrating the U.S. Open. We regularly use technology to create visual surprises and enhance our storytelling.

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In 2015, *The New Yorker* celebrated its 90th anniversary. How does your brand, with such a long history, stay current for its stakeholders?

■ The tagline we adopted in our marketing, as well as in our internal operations, was '90 Years New.' It is sometimes fun to be nostalgic—we certainly have amazing historical assets—but day-to-day we remain focused on looking ahead. Our ninetieth anniversary covers are a good example of our view on things. Eustace was the inspiration, but the nine new interpretations are what made the anniversary edition current and relevant for the day. Also, inside the publication, David Remnick and some of our writers took the occasion of the anniversary to appropriately position the past in the context of the present and future. They discussed what was happening in the world around each of the nine previous decades. It was a way to talk about the journey we are on now—not just where the publication was, but where it was going.

In the current media landscape, which continues to undergo dramatic change, how does *The New Yorker* adapt without abandoning some of its longstanding values and beliefs?

■ Our organization is operating in a time when journalism has, to some degree, been overly democratized to the point where the quality of work has sometimes been diminished. Given this context, one of David Remnick's biggest priorities has been to protect the integrity of the things *The New Yorker* holds dear: maintaining the highest standards of writing, editing, accuracy, and polish. In 2001, when newyorker.com

first launched, David insisted that we maintain a paywall on our website. His point, which proved to be true, is that our readers respect what we do and will support what it costs—both in terms of time and money—to report, write, fact-check, and edit to the degree that we do. In the end, that decision turned out to be one of the better decisions we made for the ongoing vitality of our brand and our business.

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In 2014, when redesigning our website, we made the choice to treat all of our assembled online content equally, with regards to the paywall. We modeled the behavior with McKinsey & Company, and the real-world result was a success that has been transformational for our business.

Our online archive is also rich in quantity and quality. When something of importance happens in the world today, we have a deep repository of culturally relevant stories that goes back nine decades. In 2015, to mark the seventieth anniversary of the atomic bombing in Hiroshima, we made John Hersey's 1946 report available online. It was the most-read story that week. When the performer Prince died, fans could go into our archive and read every review we'd ever written of his work and look at how we talked about him in a larger cultural sense. Our archive is worth a lot to readers of *The New Yorker*, and they are willing to pay for it, to subscribe and protect it for years to come. In this sense, '90 Years New' wasn't just a marketing slogan; it reflected the timeless quality and the enduring value of the stories we tell every day.

What inspires you most about the work you are doing now? What lasting impact do you and your leadership team aim to make with your contributions to *The New Yorker*?

■ The reason we are all here, whether on the editorial or the business side, is that we believe that we are all part of a cause and part of a mission. *The New Yorker* matters. It matters for writing and it matters for journalism.

Our stories have changed laws and had a lasting impact in society. In 2014, Jennifer Gonnerman told a heartbreaking story about a young man, 16-year-old Kalief Browder, who spent three years on Rikers Island without a trial. Jennifer's piece materially contributed to an overhaul of New York's prison policies and trial system. It was also recognized in 2015 as a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize—the first magazine piece to receive this distinction. The ability of this publication and its writers to put pressure on power, to be able to use journalism as a means to impact legislation and right wrongs, is one important reason why we are all here.

There are few publications that create the kind of change and lasting impact that *The New Yorker* has over time. Other magazines were great during stretches, but to be great at it for the better part of ninety-one years is an astonishing feat. *The New Yorker* is a pillar of American journalism and culture. It is an institution that people care about, that moves them dramatically and that matters in their life. It's our responsibility—as editors and publishers—to make certain *The New Yorker* continues to matter.

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As a leader helping to successfully guide *The New Yorker* toward its 10th decade, what advice do you have for others looking to achieve a similar longstanding relevance for their brand?

■ First, as leaders, you have to start with very clearly knowing what your brand is, what it is not, and being united about your brand's core values. Many people get themselves into trouble by being schizophrenic about their brand. David and I are always clear about what *The New Yorker* means, the place it holds in the culture. The majority of our brand priorities—like whether our writing has the power and depth to move you—are timeless.

Next, while there is value in respecting the past, to continue it, there is also a need to be present and live in the now. You cannot persist by living in an ivory tower and not being responsive to the realities of the outside world. At *The New Yorker*, we are advantaged, because our work is about writing for the present world on a daily basis. David and his editorial team are reporting on the world as it is changing right now. For example, before they were the powerhouses they are today, we wrote about how Netflix was disrupting the film industry and how Spotify was disrupting the music industry.

David is also constantly seeking out new writers and voices to reflect the times. Jennifer Gonnerman, whom I referenced earlier, joined as a staff writer in 2015 and has done tremendous work for us. Kathryn Schulz, who won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for her reporting on a potentially devastating earthquake in the Pacific Northwest, joined in 2015. Jelani Cobb has been writing for our website for several years, on race, politics, and culture, and was named a staff writer last year. There are so many more examples I could give. All of our writers, established and new, are at the top of their game. We may be a brand with more than ninety years of history, but we are also a brand that reflects the times, and our writers are integral to that.

Finally, don't accept that there are any sacred cows. In the publishing business, many said that it was not the right time, because of the democratization or commoditization of journalism, to raise subscription prices or enforce a paywall on a website. That said, we didn't see our content as a commodity, and neither did our readers. What we offer is unconventional, so we didn't have to subscribe to the so-called conventions of our category. We are thriving because of it. Be open to challenging everything.

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Now in its ninety-first year, The New Yorker, *which remains vital as a subscription- and advertising-based magazine, has evolved with the times to deliver its journalistic and cultural view to the world on multiple platforms. Instead of 'dumbing down' its content to achieve a generational appeal, the brand's leadership team has taken it on as their mission to maintain and grow the intelligence of the writing and reporting—to create content with cultural interest, impact, and importance. In so doing, they have mobilized a growing fan base that overwhelmingly agrees that the content is worth the read and worth the time. Not only do readers continue to pay premiums to access the publication's wealth of information, they also contribute as part of the community, at times even helping to reinterpret one of the brand's most famous icons, Eustace Tilley. As* The New Yorker *has added modern elements to its classic presentation, integrating innovation and experimentation, existing fans have remained loyal, while new fans have emerged. There has even been a sort of metaphorical passing of the baton as longtime readers have tapped into the new platforms and technologies to help introduce family and friends to the present-day world of* The New Yorker. *As the brand now heads toward its tenth decade, it would have been very easy for the leadership team to rely only upon its history as the literal guide for its future. Instead,* The New Yorker *continues to thrive not just by reading from the pages of its past, but by working to help write the pages of its history every day.*

BY MARK MILLER

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