
The {ASMe} Curse

BY WESLEY WADE

It has haunted presidents of the editors' organization, but it's not the only thing they have to worry about

SOMEBODY HAD BETTER HIRE A SHAMAN OVER at the offices of the American Society of Magazine Editors. The trade organization may need more than hope and a prayer to dispel the curse that has afflicted its leadership. In the past 10 years, three of its former presidents have either lost their jobs during or after their terms in office or watched haplessly as their magazine folded.

In 1997, while he was president of ASME, Frank Lalli was replaced as managing editor of *Money* and was promoted to senior executive editor of Time Inc. Within six months he had quit that job and started his own consulting business, and three years later, after being appointed editor-in-chief of *George* magazine, he was unemployed again when *George* went under. A month after George Curry was elected president of ASME in 2000, he lost his position as editor-in-chief of *Emerge*—dissatisfied with the magazine's meager earnings, its parent company, Vanguard Media, put it on indefinite hiatus. And in 2002, while president of ASME, Susan Ungaro was replaced as editorial consultant at *Rosie* magazine, and three years later, she lost her job as editor-in-chief of *Family Circle*—which she'd held for 11 years—after Meredith Corporation acquired it.

Now that Ungaro's successor as ASME president, *Newsweek's* Mark Whitaker, is ending his term in office, you have to wonder whether the curse will strike his replacement. According to those in the know, that will be Cynthia Leive, the editor-in-chief of *Glamour* and current vice president of ASME. Whether or not the celebrated women's magazine or the talented Ms. Leive will fall victim to ASME's kiss of death, the magazine industry (like the newspaper business), remains in flux, and the new president will be faced with an

array of problems, what with the surging Internet, endless rounds of mergers and acquisitions and the volatile state of the economy.

The past year's industry developments give some indication of the work she will have cut out for her. Last year saw the failure of many fledgling and mature titles—including highly touted ones like *Sync*, *Radar* and *Vitals*. Meanwhile, other celebrated publications—*Time*, *Family Circle* and *Good Housekeeping* among them—experienced declines in earnings. An industry scandal was revealed when the Audit Bureau of Circulations charged that several magazine companies, including Time Inc. and *Business Week*, had overstated their readership in an attempt to sustain revenues from advertisers. And, as if all that weren't enough, the threat posed by the growth of the Internet has put editors and publishers in a tizzy as they continue to try to figure out how to harness the technology while simultaneously maintaining a strong and relevant print presence.

Clearly, the 900-member group of magazine editors that comprises ASME, which works in conjunction with the Magazine Publishers of America (MPA), will not be able to overcome all the challenges affecting the industry. Nevertheless, there are three critical issues that ASME could, should and, one hopes, will continue or commence to address. Chief among them is the battle to protect editorial integrity in an increasingly commercialized business environment. As



Former ASME presidents Frank Lalli, George Curry and Susan Ungaro. Will Cindi Leive be the next victim?

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the trade group representing the interests of magazine editors, ASME is responsible for establishing and clarifying—and trying to enforce—standards and guidelines that can help insulate editors from the pressures of publishers and advertisers. Secondly, ASME can help promote diversity in an industry where the people who create magazines look too little like their multiracial and multicultural readers. Finally, ASME could

take meaningful steps that would open up its own house, as a way of giving voice to the astonishing array of smaller and less affluent—but, perhaps, more politically and culturally adventurous—periodicals.

Currently, ASME attempts to address the first issue using a set of guidelines that aim to assure readers of a magazine’s integrity and editorial independence from advertisers by promulgating rules for keeping editorial content separate from advertising, and clearly identifying what is an ad and what isn’t. But rules alone aren’t necessarily enough; editors still regularly succumb to corporate demands that stretch the guidelines to their limits. It’s part of ASME’s job to make sure that the spirit of the guidelines are taken seriously by its members.

“I think the basic thing that the head of the ASME could do,” said Frank Lalli, who is now vice president of development at Reader’s Digest Association, “is to inspire people to come into the magazine business and then to do their best work, and that [requires] a setting of standards. The magazine awards [presented annually by ASME] are a very valuable thing. They set a benchmark.”

Yet the issues surrounding the standards and guidelines still bedevil the industry. “We’ve revised the ASME guidelines for editors,” said Susan Ungaro, now an ex-officio board member. “That was under [Mark Whitaker’s] presidency. We looked at it and decided to make it simpler and make it the Ten Commandments for editorial integrity.” Ungaro, who is currently a consultant, believes that the changes helped make the guidelines clearer and more precise, not only to further encourage the separation of church (editorial) and state (advertising), but also to allay the fears of those editors who have argued that the guidelines have hurt the industry by preventing magazine publishers from competing effectively with the Internet and TV for advertising dollars.

In addition to setting editorial standards, ASME can also work to help diversify magazine staffs in an industry that has long resisted true integration (despite notable exceptions like Lalli at *Money*, where, by the time he left, one out of three staffers were nonwhite). “I happen to like ASME a lot,” said George Curry, who was the association’s first black president. “I think it’s a very open-minded organization, even though the industry, in a lot of respects, is very closed. It really has a sense of fair play and I guess that’s evident in our being elected by our peers. To me, it is not surprising that I was elected or that Mark [Whitaker] would get elected, because it’s based on the merits. And that’s not like the industry.”

Though ASME has implemented programs to foster inclusion, these efforts haven’t made any significant headway. Curry, now editor-in-chief of the National Newspaper Association News Service, suggests other ways that the organization can continue these efforts. “One thing I wanted to do was to recruit more at historical black colleges and not just look for black students at Columbia and Northwestern,” he said. “And to be more aggressive in introducing magazines to people of color.”

While working to diversify the industry’s human capital, ASME

should also seek to open up its own insulated processes. At present, the association’s leadership seems to be self-selecting and self-perpetuating. A committee made up of the president, two sitting board members and two other ASME members handpicks potential board members, who usually serve for eight to 12 years. The same committee also nominates the organization’s officers and presents the slate to the entire mem-

bership for approval by vote, which has always been just a formality.

“In my memory there’s never been an alternate candidate,” said Lalli. “It’s a semiautomatic process. You become one of the officers and move up one rank each year, and so the heir apparent is apparent. What disturbs that from time to time is that one of the people loses their job. If you’re not an active editor, you can’t be president, so that takes you off the ladder and you have to find somebody else to step in.”

That is why, although the formal election has yet to happen, it is already known that Cindi Leive will be the next president. Evan Smith, editor of *Texas Monthly*, will follow her a year or two later, depending on whether Leive will accept a second term. Even though all of the nominees are top editors, they are prisoners of their establishment’s perspective.

Richard Landry, executive director of the Independent Press Association, which represents some 400 small-circulation periodicals, argues that this self-selecting process extends to ASME’s role as the industry’s arbiter of taste through its selections for the annual awards. “One of the great flaws, or vulnerable underbellies, of organizations like ASME,” said Landry, “is that it is simply at this level an old boys’ club, in which the content representing excellence in the [award] categories is really the content that represents excellence in a very thin layer of the magazine publishing community. If you compare the lists of finalists in the last 10 years, the number of new entrants into the space would be very minor.

“The membership of the MPA,” he continued, “doesn’t represent even a small percentage of the creativity that’s happening in media today, including print media. And it would behoove both those organizations, MPA and ASME, to become a lot more aware of the creative lifeblood that is stirring in smaller niche media, because that’s where new ideas come from.”

Even though the offbeat *Virginia Quarterly Review* received six National Magazine Award nominations this year, Landry does have a point. He says that ASME could learn from the Utne Independent Press Awards, where a “more nuanced and complete picture” of the magazine community is represented. As examples, he mentioned *Clamor*, *Giant Robot* and *URB*, which have been producing outstanding work that so far has gone unrecognized because of ASME’s limited view of editorial excellence.

Understandably, Cindi Leive is reluctant to speak now, in advance of her presumed election, about plans she might have for reshaping the organization. But considering the challenges she will encounter, she might want to pay some attention to Landry’s observations. She could invite him and the board of the Independent Press Association for a *tête-à-tête* to discuss how ASME could be more open to the needs of smaller publishers. She could employ Curry’s help in invigorating the minority-recruitment program.

And she had better watch her back, if she hopes to escape the ASME kiss of death. ◆