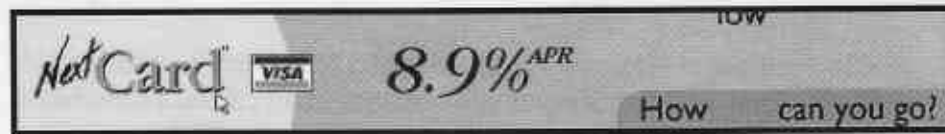


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Behind the Newhouse empire

December 13, 1998

BY HEDY WEISS

S.I. ("Si") Newhouse Jr. is the billionaire who owns a vast network of newspapers, cable TV outlets and most crucially, the Conde Nast empire, which publishes such glossy, style-promoting magazines as Vogue, Vanity Fair, Glamour, Architectural Digest and House & Garden. He also owns the New Yorker, the much debated, financially troubled, but still prestigious weekly that has obsessed and bedeviled him since he bought it in 1985.

As Carol Felsenthal observes in *Citizen Newhouse*, he lacks the instant name recognition and personal flair of such media moguls as William Randolph Hearst, Henry Luce and Rupert Murdoch. But his power should never be underestimated, even when he is not overtly exercising it.

This is something Felsenthal learned firsthand last year after she submitted *Citizen Newhouse* to her publisher, Viking. The Chicago-based writer, whose previous biographies have dealt with Washington Post publisher Katharine Graham, presidential daughter Alice Roosevelt Longworth and conservative gadfly Phyllis Schlafly, produced an altogether publishable work.

Yet it was rejected because, as two executives at Penguin Putnam, Viking's parent company, explained, too many of the people mentioned in the book were friends of theirs. In other words, it would make it very difficult for them to do business down the road.

Such incestuous concerns are a perfect example of the danger that lurks in the current concentration of mass media in a few giant conglomerates.

Citizen Newhouse

Portrait of a Media Merchant.

By Carol Felsenthal. Seven Stories. \$29.95.

If just three or four outlets are the source of the most crucial and prestigious jobs in the business, few people will run the risk of criticizing them. And if the media will not probe its own, who will? True, Felsenthal found a smaller, alternative publisher--but a Seven Stories imprint does not carry the same prestige or marketing clout as Viking.

At the heart of Felsenthal's unauthorized biography is the story of how Newhouse's father, Sam, amassed this empire, and of how Si, the first-born son, and his younger brother, Donald, have ruled it.

Her book may lack the direct voice of her subject (which, we are told, is distinguished by a stupefying inarticulateness), and many other major figures close to him. But she has done extensive research and gleaned information from hundreds of peripheral interview subjects. While no one would mistake Felsenthal for a great stylist--her book often reads like an over-stuffed term paper--she has done her homework. And she tells a fascinating, often depressing saga of how an American publishing business that now spans three generations of a single family has been operated.

There is much that is negative in the book, but it is no hatchet job. Felsenthal tries to be scrupulously balanced, yet still dishes dirt when it deserves to be dished. She also manages to suggest the larger story of the way publishing has evolved (or ``devolved") over the course of the century.

The first 150 pages of *Citizen Newhouse* (the title is distinctly ironic) are devoted to the genuine powerhouse of the family, Sam. The son of impoverished Russian-Jewish immigrants, he was born on New York's Lower East Side in 1895. By age 13, Sam (who stood under 5 feet, as Felsenthal keeps reminding us), was supporting his family by working as an office boy above the offices of a failing New Jersey newspaper. By 16 he was running the paper; by 1922 he owned it. A mogul was in the making.

Sam never had any high-minded ideas about journalism. As the author notes, he could just as easily have owned laundromats; his primary interests were making money, expanding his holdings and keeping it all in the family. In fact, he did precisely that, maintaining a low profile and making shrewd business decisions until just a few years before his death at the age of 84. Along the way, he attempted to squelch competition, deny the unions and avoid the IRS, often employing the dubious services of that ubiquitous fixer, Roy Cohn, a good friend of his son. Sam's papers continue to be highly profitable, even if, until recently, their content has been abysmal.

Despite his flaws, Sam proves irresistible in Felsenthal's account. But ah, pity the son of a fabulously successful self-made man--a man who was

not of a generation or temperament that excelled in forging close emotional bonds. Si, now 71, and almost as insecure, socially awkward and elusive as when he was an adolescent, floundered in his father's business until he was close to 40 and found his niche at Conde Nast, the magazine chain Sam bought in 1959. Some say Si flounders to this day-- buying or developing new magazine properties at exorbitant prices; engaging in the most erratic and often cruel practices of hiring and firing; and leading the parade of style and celebrity over substance that ultimately undermined his ownership of publishing giant Random House, and forced him to sell it to the German conglomerate Bertelsmann. Si also stands accused of corrupting the New Yorker via its Hollywood-besotted editor Tina Brown, although Felsenthal refreshingly skewers the magazine's hypocritical old guard leadership as well.

Felsenthal carries the Newhouse story through to last July when Brown departed as editor of the New Yorker and was replaced by writer David Remnick (whose reputation she calls into question in a somewhat hasty bit of last-minute sniping). You finish her book knowing that you will never flip through Vogue again without thinking of the nest of vipers responsible for it. You also hope that Philip Roth might someday write a novel about Sam Newhouse.

Hedy Weiss is the Sun-Times' theater critic.

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