

Target market: The New Yorker's mistake

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [October 4, 2005](#) issue

On the lecture circuit I once met a man who was one of the hierarchs in the advertising division of the *New Yorker*. I was primed to learn more about the magazine's editors and writers, who are heroes and heroines to me, but he told me he did not know any of them. The magazine did all it could, as a matter of policy, to separate the advertising personnel from the editorial staff.

Not many years before, the magazine had devoted most of its pages to a long excerpt from James Baldwin's wrenching account of racial strife in the America, *The Fire Next Time*. It appeared, many readers noted, among advertisements for luxury items whose location in American life was far from Baldwin's subject. Would those ads have been juxtaposed with such a contradicting counterpart had advertising and editorial people coordinated?

Years have passed and standards have changed. In the *New Yorker's* August 22 issue, 17 pages plus both sides of the front and back covers feature red-and-white balls or targets representing the discount chain Target. Not one of them is marked as an advertisement. All seem made to look like illustrations for the editorial copy. We devotees were ready to echo the betrayed kid who said to Shoeless Joe Jackson of the Chicago White Sox in 1919, "Say it ain't so, Joe."

Taking time to respond to this innovation seems trivial at a time when one could be talking about Pat Robertson, corrupt companies or the prosecution of the war in Iraq. Yet editorial ethics, like football, is a game of inches, and this violation was meters or miles long. Cheers to Lewis Lazare, *Chicago Sun-Times* columnist, for blowing the whistle on this "most jaw-dropping collapse of the so-called sacred wall . . . in modern magazine history," a most "shameful moment."

In response, publisher David Carey called Lazare "a crazy nut." He added apologies to "all the Martians who might be offended. But for our readers, who are 100 percent loyal, they get it in a nanosecond." His reminder that "we have a business" and that

the magazine is “not a public trust” left me offended, at least for a nanosecond. By the way, Carey claims that the *New Yorker* continues to adhere to a “true separation of church and state,” saying, “I never have a conversation with editorial about content.”

The response shows how taken-for-granted “product placement” is. Publisher Carey apparently delights in the confusion this blurring of editorial copy and advertising caused. He forces us readers to raise the level of our own “hermeneutics of suspicion.” Can we ever trust the magazine quite the same way again?

I was almost tempted to grow a beard and march with the other “crazy nuts,” wearing a sandwich board saying, “Repent. The End Is Near.” But this Martian can’t march while reading the *New Yorker*, which I intend to do next week as always, hoping the publishers won’t sin this away again in the next 80 years.