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NEWS MEDIA

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The Voice's Felker (right) with Burden: Allies in an embattled board room

The Voice of Felker

When the parent company of sleek New York magazine acquired the raffish Village Voice a year ago, Clay Felker, New York's editor, promised to handle the new property with kid gloves. It hasn't worked out quite that way. In a busy first year, Felker has presided over an upheaval on the Voice staff, eventually naming himself editor-in-chief and publisher. He has revamped the weekly's layout and transformed its editorial policies, drawing a chorus of both praise and criticism. And Felker has encountered some serious financial problems that have started a rumble within his own corporate headquarters.

In the first quarter of 1975, the Voice's circulation dropped from the 150,000 reported a year ago to 144,000, and 6,000 of those subscriptions are being "graced" or temporarily extended beyond their expiration dates. Part of the decline can be attributed to the recession, and part to the doubling of the Voice's newsstand price to 50 cents. But Felker's critics also ascribe the drop in readership to a change in the tone and content of the Voice itself—from Greenwich Village iconoclasm to trendy, upper-middle-class chic. They note that, despite the drop in total circulation, the Voice has attracted 10,000 new readers in the suburbs, which suggests an even larger loss in its Manhattan heartland.

Sex: The Voice's strong new graphic look, masterminded by New York magazine's design director Milton Glaser, has won praise from all quarters. But a side effect of the eye-grabbing style, says Voice writer Jack Newfield, has been "a certain amount of [illegible] articles on sex, violence and personalities." One controversial recent story with a heavy dose of all three qualities was Blair Sabol's catty profile of Linda McCartney, the wife of ex-Beatle Paul. Many readers—and some Voice writers—complain that less glamorous stories on local politics and community problems are now being given short shrift. The layout has eliminated what Voice press critic Alexander Cockburn calls the "thrill of chasing an article through ten page-jumps into a foxhole 70 pages later," but it also has shortened stories which, in the old Voice, rambled on until the writer ran out of breath.

Felker, 49, dismisses fans of the old Voice as "romantic amnesiacs. The Voice," he insists, "is now at its literary peak." But writer Ron Rosenbaum, who recently announced his resignation by shredding his paycheck onto Felker's desk, charges that "stories are frequently manufactured in editorial story conferences. It is no longer a writer's newspaper." Resignations have been few, but some unreconstructed old-timers are urging founding editor Daniel Wolf—who, along with publisher Edwin Fancher, was fired by Felker—to revive a "true Voice in exile." Although Wolf, 59, says that "my options are open," he frankly wonders whether "I really would be able to do it all over again."

Like some other Voice stalwarts, Newfield thinks that "in many ways, the new Voice is a better paper. And as long as I feel there is space for a dialogue in which my point of view is listened to and sometimes my argument prevails, then I still find this the best place to be." Felker does listen to people like Newfield; he even courts them in a paternal way. "At first the writers didn't want me around," [illegible] "[illegible] when Daddy wasn't around more. They wanted someone—an editor—to talk to about their story ideas." For the past few weeks, Felker has been dropping in on the Voice at least once a day. Some disaffected writers think that his very presence leads to sycophancy. "When Felker gets off the elevator," says Rosenbaum, "writers and editors line his path waving stories at him, trying to get his attention. It's much like courtiers pleading, 'A boon, sire'."

So far, the Voice's balance sheet has been no great boon to anyone. In the first quarter of this year, profits were only $46,000, as against 1974 first-quarter profits of $255,000. But Felker notes that he has raised salaries, renovated the offices, straightened out the computerized printing system and hired a circulation manager. He says that by the end of this year he will have "pumped some $2 million into the Voice."

Thirst: New York magazine itself lost $151,000 in the slow first quarter, insiders say, compared to a loss of $97,000 a year ago. The downturn at the two publications—plus what some people regard as Felker's thirst for power—touched off a confrontation last April with the "money men" on the parent company's board of directors. Felker reportedly tried to remove two financiers from the board: A. Robert Towbin and company chairman Alan Patricof. He formed an alliance with director Carter Burden, a socially prominent New York City councilman who owns 24 per cent of the company's stock (Felker owns about 10 per cent). Felker was on the verge of bringing off his coup when some major financial backers threatened to pull out of the company, which could have crippled its ability to raise money.

Although he lost that battle, Felker consolidated his power two weeks ago when Bartle Bull, another 10 per cent

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