

# A Nimble Voice

## Staying current in print

Interview with John Podhoretz

**C**OMMENTARY, “the monthly magazine of opinion,” is in the thick of it — literally. The editorial office is located in New York City, the biggest COVID-19 hot spot in the United States. But it’s also the case figuratively. The May 2020 issue of the magazine was one of the first titles to roll off the presses at Lane with a significant focus on the pandemic. And we mean *significant* — four feature pieces and two commentaries with thoughtful relevance to the crisis, including a cover story on “pandemics ancient and modern and the lessons they teach.” We wanted to know how COMMENTARY reacted so quickly in print, and how a voice of relevance fits into its brand, so we asked Editor John Podhoretz.

**What is the editorial mission of COMMENTARY? What do your readers value about it?**

COMMENTARY’s editorial mission is to speak out in favor of the United States, the West, Western culture, and democracy; to represent in its pages the highest level of argumentation and discussion; to stand as a bulwark against antisemitism; and to defend the State of Israel. I think our audience values our seriousness and our seriousness of purpose and looks to COMMENTARY not only to inform but to entertain and enlighten.

**When the pandemic hit, you pivoted quickly with your May 2020 issue (which printed in early April) to make the focus relevant. How did you change focus so quickly, and why was doing so important?**

Since I became editor 11 years ago, we’ve worked hard to maintain the flexibility to switch gears and focus on a fast-breaking topic — even though we are not a news publication. That’s why you’ll see articles that have been in the works for months sharing space with pieces that were literally written the morning before the presses run. In this case, we actually were concerned we might be offering too much material about the pandemic because we feared readers might find it overwhelming or depressing. We could have published much, much more.

**You recently increased the frequency of your popular podcast, “The COMMENTARY Magazine Podcast.” Why? And does your**

**podcast content inform your print content?**

We increased the frequency from twice-weekly to daily the minute my kids’ schools were shut down in New York City. It became clear that something entirely new was going on and that a great many people in our audience were basically trapped at home with nothing to do. So we thought maybe we would give them something to listen to. The response has been overwhelming. The podcast audience has tripled, and month-to-month subscriptions to COMMENTARY have more than doubled. The articles in our June issue by me and Noah Rothman in particular about the pandemic are all reflections of the discussions we’ve had on the podcast.

**How do you think COMMENTARY’s mission and audience would be impacted if you didn’t continue putting it out in print?**

COMMENTARY is a magazine. We are not an online content provider (although we have a website), nor are we a podcasting outfit. Everything we do is in support of the print magazine, which will reach its 75th birthday in November. It is one of the few enduring print publications in America, and we are going to keep it in print as long as there is a COMMENTARY.

**If being a strong voice to your audience is your primary mission, is that more important than ever at a time like this?**

COMMENTARY is a magazine for traditional readers. That is our writ, our reason for being. The strength of the voice is, I hope, mirrored in the excellence of our physical presentation — the look of our covers, our legible typography, our painstaking copy editing, and the sheer heft of thing in your hands. COMMENTARY is real, not virtual, and that is the most important statement we can make in these times.

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