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The Contribution of City Magazines to the Urban Information Environment

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Abstract

American city magazines today must appeal to audiences who have new ways to find community information. User-generated digital content and social media have supplanted not just newspapers but also city magazines' service stories and restaurant listings. City magazines also have new opportunities for in-depth coverage that newspapers can no longer afford. This content analysis of nineteen US print city magazines examines their contribution to their communities' information environment, particularly their mix of coverage, approaches to hard news, and representations of people and places. The study suggests ways to sustain these magazines during industry and technological changes through deeper, diverse coverage.

Keywords: city magazines, local news, magazine publishing, urban information

Introduction

City residents no longer need a print newspaper or city magazine to learn where to find the best Thai restaurant in town, which spa offers the best massages, or which local theater has a two-for-one ticket offer this weekend. A smartphone and the user's preferred app provide that information, all for free, along with reviews from fellow users, GPS mapping, and special deals.

This is a familiar tale to anyone who has kept up with the growth of mobile tools and news. Additionally, the story of newspapers' decline has been told and retold. However, the function of another local medium—the city magazine—hasn't yet received much attention, even as it too has faced the same changes in the city information environment.

Casual observers of city magazine covers on the magazine stand might think they lack serious reporting, focusing on service journalism and missing in-depth coverage of local issues. However, little research has been conducted on this medium in recent years, and it may be the case that city magazines are adopting new approaches to covering their local areas. As newspapers' resources for reporting have declined, perhaps city magazines have moved to fill spaces left by newspapers' retreat from long-form, substantial reporting.

This study offers an exploratory content analysis of the covers and stories of 19 award-winning print city magazines, as the third and final component of a larger research project on the

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changing function of the US city magazine.¹ This analysis examines the variety and style of news coverage provided by city magazines, their representation of diverse populations within cities, and their presentation of their cities' physical environments. The results suggest that these magazines may offer more in-depth coverage than skeptics would expect. The findings also establish a baseline for longitudinal comparisons to assess future shifts in city magazines' unique local role. The study provides further insight into the operation of varieties of local journalism in a time of significant change for all local news media.

Literature Review

City Magazines and Lifestyle Journalism

As Frith describes, magazines have “been conduits of virtual community since the middle of the twentieth century and into the Internet age.”² This function is perhaps most clearly visible in the case of city magazines. “City magazine” is defined for the purposes of this study as a consumer magazine serving a specific urban area that is published monthly or bimonthly. “Regional” magazines serving larger areas or entire states were not included in the study. All of the magazines in this study carry paid advertising and are sold by subscription and single copies, not distributed for free. This study examined only the print publications fitting this definition. In addition, all magazines included in the study were members of the City and Regional Magazine Association, the trade association representing this genre.

The city magazine genre has been long-lasting. Some city magazines, like *Honolulu* (founded in 1888 as *Paradise of the Pacific*) and *Philadelphia* (established 1909), have been published for well over a century.³ Riley and Selnow catalogued 920 city and regional magazines published between 1950 and 1988, with 470 in operation in 1991.⁴ A similar survey has not been conducted since this 1991 review, and, in fact, minimal research has been conducted on city magazines in recent years. Trade publications and industry research provide some insights into their business strategies and success. For example, the 2011 Folio City & Regional Magazine survey demonstrated that these magazines generally fared better during recent economic turmoil, thanks to their reliance on local advertisers instead of national accounts.⁵ They have experienced consolidation of ownership, with many city magazines purchased by chains of similar local publications; print advertising constitutes about three-quarters of their overall revenue, with minimal earnings from sales of digital editions or online advertising.⁶

Additionally, some information is available from a 2010 presentation shared on the website of the City and Regional Magazine Association. The CRMA promotes professional development for magazine professionals and distributes information about industry changes and new technologies. Its 2010 presentation—targeted to prospective advertisers—should be considered critically, given its goals, but it does at a minimum display what the CRMA wishes to highlight about its own member publications. According to this presentation, CRMA magazines reach over eighteen million readers who comprise “an affluent, active audience.” That audience is just over half female, with a median household income of about \$83,000 and a median age of 45.⁷ The CRMA presentation also mentions a study conducted by the Erdos and Morgan market research firm that asserts that local opinion leaders pay attention to city magazines: “better than 8 of every 10 . . . [read] one or more of the last four issues of their city magazine.”⁸

While this information helps clarify the business strategies and readership of these magazines, little is known about the content of city magazines, today or in the past. A trio of studies on city magazines, published over thirty years ago, offered interviews with editors, not assessments of the magazines' content. In these studies, researchers found that city magazine

editors and publishers wanted to support readers' pride in their cities by offering more lifestyle and entertainment/dining coverage than newspapers provided.⁹ They also believed that their publications had a unique ability to capture the "identity and flavor" of a city in a visually appealing, upscale package.¹⁰ In a more recent qualitative textual analysis, Greenberg analyzed city magazines before and after they were purchased by larger media conglomerates.¹¹

Greenberg identified a trend resulting from these transitions in which the magazines became less uniquely local and more bound to a "formula" of topics and special advertising sections that was visible across their conglomerate's city magazines.

City magazines appear to offer readers what Hanusch calls "lifestyle journalism": largely service journalism offering "news you can use" in everyday life.¹² City magazines provide a range of information to their locales' residents about local attractions, events, restaurants, businesses, and other useful topics. They also may cover key people in their cities, particularly politicians and businesspeople, in personality profiles. As Hanusch notes, lifestyle journalism in general has received little scholarly attention, with most journalism research focusing on news about politics and "serious" topics, considered journalism's primary contribution to the operation of democracy.

However, lifestyle journalism, including that provided by city magazines, has a role to play in informing citizens about other aspects of their lives that, for many, are as or even more significant than political affairs. As Eide and Knight argue, this style of coverage can still serve the needs of the public sphere.¹³ Eide and Knight state that service journalism "is oriented to resolving the problems of everyday life in ways that can combine individualistic and collective, political forms of response."¹⁴ From this perspective, service or "lifestyle" journalism is a mode of presenting information that is more applicable to most readers' daily lives and that may offer space for personal expression through a more realistic "hybrid social identity – part citizen, part consumer, part client."¹⁵ City magazines' mix of coverage may speak to exactly this kind of hybrid identity.

City magazines may also tend to offer a more "personalized" view of "hard news" topics, as these magazines' style lends itself to personality profiles of key local figures. Numerous studies have examined the role of personalized coverage of political matters, in particular. This study assesses how frequently city magazines' coverage of local hard news topics is presented through this personalized lens. That lens is what Van Aelst, Sheafer, and Stanyer term "privatization"—the coverage of a political figure as a private person, beyond his or her public function.¹⁶ This study expands the term's application beyond politicians to include other significant local figures (e.g., businesspeople, educators, etc.).

The specific effects of this privatization on readers are still under study, with recent findings (in European settings) offering mixed results. One study found that "privatized" news coverage of politics increases cynicism among a general audience.¹⁷ At the same time, another study, by an overlapping team of researchers, suggests that human interest framing of stories also increases learning from political news, especially among people with less inherent interest in the topic.¹⁸ These findings present a mixed perspective on the benefit of personalization of political news. It seems that this personalized presentation of local issues might appeal to readers more than a broader approach to significant local topics. If city magazines "personalize" serious news topics frequently, readers may find their coverage more accessible and intriguing than that offered by newspapers and other local news media.

The current study explores whether today's city magazines continue to offer generally positive lifestyle journalism or whether their range and style of coverage may in fact be broader

and deeper than usually recognized; the study also will examine the “personalization” of news in these magazines. Urban citizens’ changing needs and the challenges posed by new journalistic media may necessitate adaptations to their usual modes of coverage. Developments in the last three decades have altered readers’ and advertisers’ needs and preferences.

The Transformation of the Urban Information Environment

Today, city magazines comprise just one part of a city’s increasingly complex information environment, as Hatcher and Reader describe; there are now many potential sources for local news and information.¹⁹ In the age of print media, local newspapers and city magazines each filled fairly distinct roles, with some overlap in their provision of lifestyle journalism. Today, however, newspapers’ power as local information providers is declining as newspapers lose readers and resources. Newspapers have reduced print frequency, implemented paywalls, and laid off and reorganized newsroom staff.²⁰ Where will readers find local information as newspapers decline? Journalism observers hope that newspapers will evolve into effective, sustainable digital news organizations, but, in the meantime, audiences have already turned elsewhere to find local information. A 2015 Pew Research Center study that examined the “news ecology” of three US cities found that in the largest city studied—Denver, with a population of over two million—only 23 percent of survey respondents obtained news “often” from the daily newspaper.²¹ Local radio and “other local residents” were equally popular as news sources, with each mentioned as used “often” by 23 percent of these respondents. However, only 8 percent of Denver respondents aged 18-34 obtained news often from the daily newspaper, demonstrating generational differences in the appeal of the newspaper as a news source.

Today’s alternative information sources, like social media and niche digital news websites, present additional challenges to the onetime dominance of newspapers as a leading local news source among all age groups. In the same Pew study, 10 percent of respondents said that social media were the “most important” way they received local news.²² Perhaps even more notably, at least 16 percent of each city’s respondents aged 18-34 said that social media were their most important source for local news, suggesting that newspapers’ presence in their lives is primarily digital, if used at all.²³ Furthermore, digitally minded audience members may seek out or encounter niche local news websites, which are being launched in many cities to reach hyperlocal, ethnic, issue-focused, or other specific communities that have unique information needs not always addressed by the general-interest daily newspaper.²⁴

City magazines, while they have coexisted with newspapers for a very long time, are also repositioning themselves for the digital age, sometimes in ways that challenge newspapers’ role as not only “lifestyle journalism” providers but also as providers of all kinds of journalism, including “hard” news. Conversations with city magazine editors suggest that they have already detected this new opportunity to expand their publications’ scope into long-form, explanatory, and interpretive journalism.²⁵ As one editor stated, “15 years ago, 12 years ago, we worried a lot about what the newspaper might do before we started to do a story. Now we don’t even really consider it . . . recognizing they’re not doing the kinds of stories they used to do.”²⁶ Given their slower publication cycle and their greater financial stability during economically trying times, city magazines may be poised to pick up the slack in the provision of investigative, in-depth news left by newspapers’ decline.

Though aspects of their coverage may appeal more to readers than that of newspapers, city magazines also are challenged by technological developments. Of particular concern might be the growth of user-generated, lifestyle-oriented digital media, such as restaurant and attraction

reviews on sites like Yelp and TripAdvisor, which are widely used, are designed for mobile devices, and are built on free content created by the public. Moreover, the audience that uses these online and mobile resources is very similar to that targeted by city magazines in terms of income, education level, and interests. For example, Yelp's users are 58 percent female; 64 percent have at least a college degree; and among their top ten online interests are travel news and information, jewelry and luxury goods, and events—some of the main topics addressed by city magazines. This user base mirrors the readership of the average city magazine, with one major difference: age. Almost three-quarters of Yelp users are 44 or below, and about half are 34 or younger.²⁷ The average reader of the city magazines in this study is 51 (based on information drawn from their media kits, when available).²⁸

Will today's Yelp user mature into a city magazine reader, or will younger generations—largely unaccustomed to using print information sources—continue to prefer digital media for local information? City magazine editors argue that their publications can still offer a unique sense of authority and a curation ability that readers appreciate.²⁹ It may be a tough sell to get today's youthful Yelp user to pay subscription fees just to get a city magazine's "authority" and "curation." Something else may need to be on offer—such as uniquely presented, in-depth local journalism—to make the cost seem worthwhile. Whether that content is yet available in city magazines is one question this study seeks to address.

Representations of People and Places in City Magazines

City magazines' assertion of authority comes with responsibilities to their local citizens. City magazines tell stories about people within their cities and may influence readers' sense of local geography and of their fellow citizens. Additionally, city magazines' visual images of their cities may imply much about what is valued in those locales as well as which and whose stories are worth telling about them.

Burd offers a more comprehensive examination of the shifting role of communication and media within cities than can be provided here, evaluating rapid changes both in technology and in audience habits.³⁰ He argues that "the traditional city as a geographic place has continued to be under siege as communications media struggle to adapt and survive within their historic urban home."³¹ The city's geographical boundaries have begun to matter less and the reach and content of their communicative processes more. Because they are strongly identified with specific places—their titles are usually their cities' names—the ways city magazines visually represent their people and places may suggest that certain kinds of people and locations within the city are more important than others. The city magazine helps to define the "place-ness" of a city for its residents and in some ways could perhaps be seen as a stabilizing force for the "traditional city" Burd describes. However, he also argues that city magazines have remained "largely civic boosters rather than critical journalism."³²

Newspapers have adapted to the new context of media in their own way. Buchanan found that some Canadian newspapers have offered less local coverage that represents their cities distinctively, instead providing readers "more national representations of place."³³

This focus on the national perspective—as opposed to a recognizably local representation of news and issues—could reflect a variety of factors, Buchanan argues, including the rise of television and digital news sources that have supplanted newspapers' local, unifying role. City magazines could perhaps become a reinvigorated source for that lost local representation, providing readers a cohesive look at their locales.

However, American journalism, including that found in magazines, has often failed to include diverse, non-stereotypical, and accurate representations of gender and race/ethnicity.³⁴ It is worth examining whether city magazines have repeated this pattern. Furthermore, as Martin points out, “The power to define, describe, or characterize place . . . [allows] social structures and institutions [to] maintain certain forms of power, through discursive naming of places into categories and defining the terms” of their social and economic engagement.³⁵ Media representations of places, in city magazines and beyond, help to establish and maintain power relations within these locales. Therefore, it is important to scrutinize exactly how the media represent places and especially to determine who is shown as possessing power and importance within these places.

The images included in local media are also important for audiences’ understanding. Readers grasp local geography by seeing photographs and other depictions of the local environment. As Gutsche found in an analysis of photographs of a purported “crime wave” in one city newspaper, journalists’ emphasis on certain spatial characteristics of a city can contribute to the construction of inaccurate narratives and stereotypical representations of citizens.³⁶ The audience uses this information to “construct place images and cognitive maps.”³⁷ At the same time, however, crowdsourcing also makes it possible for readers to participate in digital mapping projects, reducing local media’s capability to define geography for its audience.³⁸ Even those images selected by magazine editors and other media producers may fail to include key contextual information to help readers physically locate their content, reducing their local relevance.³⁹ For example, a photograph may show a person or an object without visible geographic cues, thereby diminishing the local feel of the image’s subject.

Given our lack of knowledge about the specific blend and presentation of information in today’s city magazines—and their adaptations to the rapid changes in the urban information environment—a close examination of their content is timely. This exploratory analysis also provides a baseline against which to assess the evolution of this genre in the future. This study examined the content of today’s city magazines with these research questions:

- RQ1. How do city magazines cover “hard news” topics?
 - 1a. What is the quantity of this coverage, compared to other topics?
 - 1b. Does this “hard news” coverage tend to be personalized?
 - 1c. Is “hard news” coverage emphasized within the magazines, in terms of story length and image usage?
- RQ2. How do city magazine cover images represent gender and racial/ethnic diversity within their communities?
- RQ3. How do city magazine cover images represent the physical environment of their communities?

Method

This study addressed these research questions through a quantitative content analysis. This research method was appropriate because it offered a means of summarizing observations about these magazines’ covers, articles, and images across many issues. This content analysis also generated a quantitative baseline that could be used in future comparative studies in order to identify changes over time in these magazines’ content.

Sampling

This study used a combination of stratified and constructed-year sampling techniques to form a sample of seventy-six magazine issues, representing nineteen different magazines across the United States and their coverage throughout a full year (May 2011 to May 2012). The present study is part of a larger research project focused on various aspects of American city magazines, each of which used the same selection of magazines as a starting point for exploration.⁴⁰

Given the large number of city magazines in the United States, it was necessary to narrow the pool considered for sampling. This study's interest in the breadth and depth of news coverage provided by these magazines suggested that those that have been recognized for journalistic excellence might best represent their medium for further analysis. Therefore, an initial list of city magazines that have won City and Regional Magazine Association awards was compiled using the CRMA website. These CRMA award-winning magazines are ostensibly doing the "best" work in terms of satisfying journalistic norms valued by their peers.

The initial list included five years' worth of award winners (2007-2011) in the following award categories that focus on editorial content and community engagement: general excellence, reporting, personality profile, feature story, reader service, civic journalism, community service project, excellence online, and multimedia. All three circulation categories were included in order to represent publications in smaller and larger cities. The list was then narrowed to include only specifically *city* magazines, as opposed to *state* or *regional* magazines. The list then included nineteen magazines for further analysis. These magazines represent diversity in other key characteristics, including city size, circulation, and ownership (independent vs. chain), as displayed in table 1 below.

Table 1. City Magazine Circulation, Local Population, and Contribution to Sample

Magazine name	Circulation	U.S. Census local population	Number of stories coded
5280	77,027	610,345	93
Atlanta Magazine	66,996	540,922	65
Baltimore	53,145	637,418	134 (2)
Boston	110,390	645,169	90
Chicago	129,199	2,851,268	100
Cincinnati	37,426	333,012	86
D Magazine	22,000	1,299,542	73
Evansville Living	13,000	116,584	106
Honolulu	35,000	390,738	72
Hour Detroit	45,000	910,921	73
Indianapolis Monthly	41,000	820,445	94
Los Angeles	140,000	3,831,868	109
Madison	20,833	235,419	88
Memphis	22,500	676,640	52
MPLS St. Paul	17,710	2,968,806	149 (1)
Philadelphia	116,840	1,547,297	105
Portland Monthly	52,892	566,143	80
Seattle Metropolitan	55,430	616,627	72
Washingtonian	137,002	599,657	131 (3)

Based on most recent media kits available through magazines' websites. Information gathered at time of data collection (summer 2012).

From these issues, a constructed year for each magazine was developed, consisting of a randomly selected issue within each quarter of the year (January-March; April-June; July-September; and October-December). This constructed year method is much like the method Lacy, Riffe, and Randle found effective for content analysis of monthly consumer magazine content.⁴¹ This sampling procedure resulted in a final sample of seventy-six magazine issues for analysis.

Within these seventy-six issues, stories were further analyzed. To qualify as a “story” for coding, blocks of text in the magazine had to be at least a paragraph in length; had to use complete sentences focused on a single theme; and could not be part of a paid advertisement (e.g., a special advertising section), a directory or listing section entry, or a teaser for content later in the magazine (criteria adapted from Lynch and Peer).⁴² Routinely published (e.g., monthly) event calendars and restaurant directories were also excluded from coding. Each issue’s cover image and primary cover line topic was also coded.

Coding Procedure

A coding scheme was applied to all issues’ cover photos and to stories as defined above. Therefore, there are two units of analysis in this study: first, the magazine cover, and second, the “story,” though magazine “stories” as defined here could vary in length from a single paragraph to many pages. Stories appeared in front- and back-of-book editorial content and in the “feature well.” This disparity in story length was accounted for in the stories’ coding.

Four variables were coded for each story: the topic; the use of “personalization,” defined as the presentation of an issue primarily through the presentation of local individual(s) personifying that issue; the type of story (e.g., news brief, column, or feature, which also connotes story length); and the quantity of photographs and/or other graphics (such as charts) included in the story’s layout, if any.

Two primary elements were coded for the magazines’ covers: photos and cover lines. Cover photos’ settings were coded as indoor or outdoor. Indoor settings were further coded as indoor photo shoots (e.g., with a model), food shown by itself, or other indoor locations. Outdoor settings were further coded as urban or otherwise. The gender, ethnicity, and occupation or “role” (e.g., sports, business, etc.) of any individuals shown in the image were also coded. In order to make useful comparisons regarding representations of ethnicity in these magazines, coding categories for individual groups (e.g., Latino/a, African American, etc.) were ultimately collapsed into “white” and “nonwhite.” Finally, the topic of the most prominent cover line—the story teaser text—shown on the cover was coded (e.g., travel, food, business, etc.).

Two coders, the author and a trained undergraduate research assistant, carried out the analysis. Intercoder reliability was calculated using roughly 20 percent of the stories in the total sample, following guidelines from Neuendorf.⁴³ The ReCal2 online utility was used to calculate Scott’s Pi, which ranged from .899 to 1 for the variables coded.⁴⁴ Results were analyzed using descriptive statistics and crosstabulations generated by SPSS.

Results

The sampling process described above resulted in a selection of seventy-six city magazine covers and 1,772 stories. Table 1 above shows the number of stories coded from each magazine as well as other details about the magazines and their cities.

In terms of geographical distribution, magazines from the Midwest contributed 696 stories to the sample, while 460 and 426 stories came from the Northeast and West; only 190

originated in the South. While this is a large regional disparity, this analysis did not find any significant differences among patterns of content in these regions, either on the magazines' covers or in their stories.

The sample included a variety of types of stories. Predictably, only about 17 percent of the stories were features; about 45 percent were column- or department-style stories, and the remaining 39 percent were brief stories.

City Magazine Coverage of Hard News

RQ1 asked how city magazines covered "hard news" topics and examined that coverage by analyzing its quantity, personalization, and emphasis within the magazines.

Quantity. RQ1a sought to determine how much "hard news" coverage existed within the magazines, compared to other topics. About 15 percent of all stories in these magazines focused on "hard news," defined as business, politics/government, education, crime, and environmental topics. Service stories (on all remaining topics) accounted for 73 percent of the stories and other topics for 12 percent.

The covers of these magazines did not reflect the proportion of stories within their pages that covered hard news, however. Only 8 percent of the covers featured hard news topics, while 86 percent focused on service topics and 6 percent other topics.

Table 2 provides a more detailed breakdown of topics covered in stories and on covers.

Table 2. Topics of City Magazine Covers and Stories

Topic	Covers Percentage of sample (<i>n</i> =76)		Stories Percentage of sample (<i>n</i> =1,772)	
Local awards, history, and culture	30	(1)	9	
Food, drink, and restaurants	28	(2)	22	(2)
Travel	15	(3)	5	
Entertainment, fashion, and sports	13		29	(1)
Other topics	7		11	(3)
Business	4		9	
Politics and politicians	4		5	
Shopping and products	0		8	
Education	0		1	
Total	101*		99*	
Service topics	86		73	
Hard news topics	8		15	

* Rounding error.

"Hard news" includes business, politics, and education topics; "service" includes all remaining topics except stories coded "other."

Personalization. RQ1b questioned whether city magazines tended to apply a "personalized" approach to their coverage of hard news topics. Indeed, these topics were often presented through a more "personalized" lens, focusing on key individuals and their stories (e.g., through a personality profile) to relate information about a broader topic. In fact, these topics were about three times more likely to be presented in this way than were "service" topics. About

23 percent of the hard news stories were personalized, whereas only about 8 percent of the service stories focused on people. Table 3 shows this significant difference in story style.

Table 3. Hard News vs. Service Topics and Personalization

	Personalized	Non-personalized
Hard news topics (%) (<i>n</i> =273)	23.4	76.6
Service journalism topics (%) (<i>n</i> =1,299)	8.3	91.7

Stories with topic coded “other” were omitted from this analysis.

Statistically significant difference in personalization; corrected $\chi^2=51.449$, $p < .001$ (2-tailed).

Emphasis. RQ1c asked to what degree hard news coverage was emphasized within the city magazines in terms of story length and image usage. This research question explored the length and depth of stories on hard news topics as well as their visual representation in the city magazines.

There were significant differences among the proportions of types of stories dedicated to hard news topics. When covered, hard news topics appeared in fewer short brief stories and more feature stories than did service topics. About 22 percent of the hard news stories were features, for example, while only about 14 percent of the service topics were features. Though there were still proportionately many more features on service topics, the magazines’ willingness to expend large amounts of space and effort on hard news topics was apparent.

However, when they were covered, hard news topics did receive fewer photographs or images with their stories. Only about 5 percent of hard news stories were displayed with six or more images, while about 12 percent of service stories had that many accompanying images. Table 4 provides a fuller look at the types of stories and images used with these topics.

Table 4. Story Length and Image Use with Hard News vs. Service Topics

Characteristic	Hard news (%) (<i>n</i> =273)	Service topics (%) (<i>n</i> =1,299)
Story length**		
Brief	30.8	43.1
Column or department	47.3	42.6
Feature story	22*	14.2*
Number of images†		
None	1.8	1
1	63	59.2
2-5	29.7	27.9
6-10	3.7	7.8
>10	1.8	4.2*

Stories with topic coded “Other” were omitted from this analysis.

* Rounding error.

** Statistically significant difference in story length; $\chi^2=18.150$, $p < .001$ (2-tailed).

† Statistically significant difference in number of images; $\chi^2=10.818$, $p = .029$ (2-tailed).

RQ2 asked how city magazine covers represented gender and racial/ethnic diversity within their communities. Table 5 summarizes the gender, racial/ethnic, and occupational diversity portrayed on the magazines' covers.

Only half of the magazine covers in this study portrayed people, and those people were not particularly diverse. Just over half of the covers with people showed men or all-male groups; 18 percent showed female or all-female groups; and the remaining 29 percent showed mixed groups of men and women. About 61 percent of the covers showed a white person or people, with 20 percent showing a nonwhite person/people, and the remaining 20 percent showing a racially/ethnically mixed group. Finally, the occupations or roles of people on the covers were coded; the largest group was "other or models," accounting for 43 percent of the people shown; 24 percent were sports or entertainment figures, 16 percent were from government or industry, and 16 percent were just ordinary citizens.

Of the five nonwhite people shown individually on the covers, two were models, two were ordinary people, and one was a sports or entertainment figure. Of the seven women shown alone on covers, six were models and one was from government or industry. Representations of men on covers varied more across all occupation categories. Given the small sample size, calculations of these comparisons' statistical significance were not useful.

Table 5. Diversity of People on City Magazine Covers ($n=38$)*

Topic	Frequency	Percentage
Male(s)	20	53
Female(s)	7	18
Mixed group	11	29
White(s)	25	61
Non-white(s)	8	20
Mixed group	8	20†
Other roles/models	16	43
Sports/entertainment	9	24
Government/business	6	16
Ordinary people/mixed group	6	16†

* Only 38 of the 76 covers in the study portrayed people.

† Does not total 100 percent due to rounding error.

City Magazine Covers and the Physical Environment

RQ3 asked how the magazine covers displayed various types of locations within their local communities. Remarkably, few covers (just 21 percent) even showed the city itself. About 40 percent of the covers portrayed indoor locations that were not clearly a particular type of business or that were taken in a studio. Almost a third of covers showed only food.

The remaining covers showed both urban (9 percent) and non-urban (12 percent) locations, as well as identifiable indoor locations like businesses, restaurants, or leisure facilities (e.g., spas). Table 6 shows the breakdown of location types shown on city magazine covers. There were not significant patterns in the portrayal of gender or race/ethnicity within these different location types nor in the topics related to these locations.

Table 6. Cities' Physical Environment on City Magazine Covers ($n=76$)

Location	Frequency	Percentage of sample
Indoor (other/photo shoot)	31	40.8
Indoor (food only)	24	31.6
Outdoor (non-urban)	9	11.8
Outdoor (urban)	7	9.2
Indoor (business, restaurant, or leisure)	5	6.6
Total	76	100

Discussion

This examination of the content of award-winning US city magazines over one year reveals intriguing patterns that suggest that their role as information providers within their cities may have started to shift, though this study can serve only as a baseline for a future longitudinal assessment of such changes.

First, the quantity of “hard news” covered in these city magazines is remarkable. Though some may deride city magazines as mere providers of lifestyle information, they are in fact dedicating about 15 percent of their coverage to hard news topics, and almost a quarter of those stories are features. While that proportion remains fairly small, it is probably greater than many would expect; it is possible that we judge city magazines too quickly by their covers. As this analysis shows, these city magazines’ covers only hinted at the quantity of hard news within their pages, with 86 percent of covers focused on service topics and a mere 8 percent portraying hard news, as shown in table 2 above. Perhaps city magazine editors feel that hard news coverage will not sell their publications as readily as food or travel topics; in fact, food by itself, with no human presence, was displayed on nearly a third of these covers, as table 6 displays.

As an opportunity to fill a “news gap” left by the decline of newspapers develops, city magazines might be well served to consider more fully promoting their hard news coverage and in-depth feature reporting to a public that may crave that information, especially if it can be presented in an attractive digital format. This may be an opportunity to move these magazines away from the long-standing perception as “city boosters” that Burd describes.⁴⁵ Dedicating more visual imagery to these stories (both in print and online), with photographs and even infographics, could enliven that coverage and make it more appealing, while also helping it stand on equal footing with the heavily visual service features that these magazines run. Table 4 shows that although city magazines publish quite a few feature stories on hard news topics, they deprive them of the same visual components they lavish on service features. If city magazine editors feel that their glossy, colorful packaging sets them apart from newspapers, they could better employ those strengths to market their in-depth news coverage.⁴⁶

Additionally, city magazines’ tendency to personalize hard news coverage through a focus on key people involved in a matter of public concern could further appeal to readers seeking an intriguing window into major issues, beyond the day-to-day facts provided by newspapers’ daily reporting. As mentioned above, news coverage through a “privatized” lens of key individuals could increase audience members’ interest in political news. In this way, city magazines’ strengths in hard news reporting uniquely complement other local media and can fill gaps in the local information environment that are only widening as newspapers decline. If city magazines can capitalize on their ability to provide in-depth, personalized, and visually rich news coverage, this move would likely strengthen their appeal to younger media users who, as earlier discussed, currently use freely available sources for their local information. Powerful

coverage in a desirable package would help youthful audiences see the value of the print city magazine and perhaps also of related digital products.

However, these city magazines also lacked a key attribute that would help broaden the appeal and depth of their coverage of their cities: diverse gender and racial/ethnic representations on their covers. Their covers showed actual people only half of the time and, when they did show people, were more likely to feature men alone than either women alone or mixed male/female groups; this finding is surprising, as city magazines generally attract a largely female readership (CRMA, 2010).⁴⁷ Perhaps more predictably, given the insights of previous research on the diversity of media portrayals, people shown on city magazine covers were mostly white, with only eight of the thirty-eight covers with people portraying people of color. America's cities continue to become more diverse. Census data show that in 97 percent of US metro areas, racial and ethnic diversity increased from 1980 to 2010; whites are now only a plurality, not a majority, in American cities with populations greater than 250,000.⁴⁸ It seems critical that city magazines acknowledge these shifts and broaden their most prominent coverage to include all kinds of people who live within their cities.

It also seems that it would be a greater public service to focus on the key people within cities and draw readers into their local stories, or at least to show actual locales within a city, as opposed to presenting models or food in isolated photo shoots. These magazines' covers only rarely portrayed their own cities, as table 6 reveals. While models or food might provide a generically appealing cover image, these photos fail to represent the unique strength of the city magazine: its ability to portray its people and city. Funk found that newspapers' websites generally did a poor job of expressing a sense of local identity; in many ways, city magazine covers demonstrate the same problem in their display of geographically indistinguishable food, models, or interior locations.⁴⁹ These findings mirror those of Machin, who observed the homogenous, consumer-oriented effects of editors' use of stock photography—not so different from the bland, universal images seen on city magazine covers.⁵⁰ These covers mirror many other covers on the newsstand, instead of asserting a local look and feel.

As discussed above, city magazines have a special authority to discuss their places from an insider perspective, and their editors believe that authority distinguishes them from their competition, particularly from user-generated, service-related content available freely online.⁵¹ More diverse and more frequent representations of both the people and the physical environment of the cities themselves on city magazines' covers would reinforce their authority and demonstrate their special value to readers.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are a variety of questions about city magazines that this exploratory study cannot answer, but that should be addressed in future research on this medium. For example, this study could not closely examine the nature of city magazine news coverage to assess how it offers information appropriate for the "hybrid social identity" that Eide and Knight say is the target audience of lifestyle journalism.⁵² A qualitative textual analysis of city magazine coverage could help shed light on ways in which it uniquely combines appeals to the consumer and the citizen within each reader. Likewise, this study did not examine in detail specifically *how* city magazines represent local issues through the profiling of key local individuals—the question of "personalization"—and instead only noted *when* this phenomenon occurred. Again, a close reading of that coverage could reveal more about how these stories seek to explain important local matters through a "privatized" lens. A study of these stories' effects on local readers'

knowledge of and attitudes about local politics would be additionally intriguing. It would also be intriguing to address the visual images of cities presented by these publications in a focused study; such an analysis would add nuance to this study's findings and would further contribute to existing scholarship on visual representations of place.

Additionally, this study did not include any of these city magazines' digital efforts, such as their websites and social media outreach. Other research has explored how city magazines have used social media to expand their interactions with their audiences beyond their monthly or bimonthly publication cycles; many of their social media posts directed the audience to online-only, daily content posted on their websites.⁵³ It may be the case that the content published on their websites—which tend to reach younger audiences—varies more in topic and diversity. Future studies could examine these digital efforts and determine if and how their content differs from city magazines' print publications, as well as how they complement other local online news and information sources. This approach could consider city magazines as another manifestation of what Hess calls "geo-social news" (though she focuses on newspapers), paying special attention to the ways this media form—on all of its platforms—helps "individuals come to identify with the 'place(s)' such [magazines] cover."⁵⁴

Finally, within a few years, a replication of this content analysis of city magazines will offer new insights into the changing function of this medium. A new analysis of their content variety and stylistic approach to covering their cities will help reveal how these magazines have—or have not—dealt with the many challenges facing their medium today. A larger sample in a future study would also permit finer-grained comparisons among key variables, such as the potential correlation of circulation with hard news content and with diverse representations within the magazines.

Conclusion

Though this study shows that city magazines are providing hard news coverage at a rate that may be surprising to some, it seems unlikely that their coverage will shift dramatically as long as they perceive themselves to be primarily of interest only to an upscale, highly educated, service-oriented readership. City magazines could offer readers—particularly those who are younger and prefer more visually engaging, portable, and personality-oriented presentations—a distinctive and valuable source of local information. These younger readers likely will care less about shopping details, restaurant directories, and other kinds of information that they have long received from digital, interactive, and usually mobile sources (though, of course, some city magazines themselves have developed their own apps and similar resources that may appeal to this audience).

However, this future audience will itself be more diverse and will expect to see itself and its familiar surroundings represented on city magazine pages. As city magazines—like other print publications—move forward and seek to maintain their appeal to audiences, these preferences and needs must be taken into consideration. Otherwise, the audience that city magazines currently reach—younger than newspapers' current audience, but not by much—will also eventually be gone, leaving these magazines without a toehold among a new generation of readers.

¹ Earlier contributions include Susan Sivek, "City Magazines and Social Media: Moving Beyond the Monthly," *Journal of Magazine & New Media Research* 14, no. 2 (2013): <http://aejmcmmagazine.arizona.edu/Journal/Fall2013/Sivek.pdf>; and Susan Sivek, "City Magazine Editors and the Evolving Urban Information Environment," *Community Journalism* 3, no. 1 (2014): 1-22, <http://journal.community-journalism.net/sites/default/files/sivek-cj2014.pdf>.

² Cary Frith, "Magazines and Community," in *Foundations of Community Journalism*, ed. Bill Reader and John Hatcher (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012), 224.

³ Sam Riley and Gary Selnow, *Regional Interest Magazines of the United States* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1991).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Matt Kinsman, "2011 City and Regional Magazine Survey," *Folio*, July 14, 2011, <http://www.foliomag.com/2011/2011-city-and-regional-magazine-survey>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ City and Regional Magazine Association (CRMA), "City and Regional Magazine Association 2010" (powerpoint presentation), 6-8, [http://www.citymag.com/ppt/CRMA DECK Revised 4-6-2010 final.ppt](http://www.citymag.com/ppt/CRMA%20DECK%20Revised%204-6-2010%20final.ppt).

⁸ Ibid., 22.

⁹ John Hayes, "City/Regional Magazines: A Survey/Census," *Journalism Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (1981): 294-96, doi:10.1177/107769908105800219; Ernest Hynds, "City Magazines, Newspapers Serve in Different Ways," *Journalism Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (1979): 619-22, doi:10.1177/107769907905600324.

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¹⁴ Ibid., 527.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Peter Van Aelst, Tamir Sheafer, and James Stanyer, "The Personalization of Mediated Political Communication: A Review of Concepts, Operationalizations and Key Findings," *Journalism* 13, no. 2 (2012): 203-20, doi:10.1177/1464884911427802.

¹⁷ Nael Jebril, Erik Albæk, and Claes de Vreese, "Infotainment, Cynicism and Democracy: The Effects of Privatization vs Personalization in the News," *European Journal of Communication* 28, no. 2 (2013): 105-21.

¹⁸ Nael Jebril, Claes de Vreese, Arjen van Dalen, and Erik Albæk, "The Effects of Human Interest and Conflict News Frames on the Dynamics of Political Knowledge Gains: Evidence for a Cross-national Study," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 36, no. 3 (2013): 201-26.

¹⁹ John Hatcher and Bill Reader, "Foreword: New Terrain for Research in Community Journalism," *Community Journalism* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-10.

²⁰ Amy Mitchell, "State of the News Media 2014: Overview," Pew Research Center, March 26, 2014, <http://www.journalism.org/2014/03/26/state-of-the-news-media-2014-overview>.

²¹ "Local News in a Digital Age," Pew Research Center, March 5, 2015, <http://www.journalism.org/2015/03/05/local-news-in-a-digital-age>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Josh Stearns, "Journalism's Theory of Change: From Community Engagement to Civic Action," *The Local News Lab* (blog), August 4, 2012, <http://localnewslab.org/2014/08/04/journalisms-theory-of-change-from-community-engagement-to-civic-action>.

²⁵ Sivek, "City Magazine Editors."

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Yelp.com traffic and demographic statistics, *Quantcast.com*, <https://www.quantcast.com/yelp.com#!summary>.

²⁸ Ibid. Notably, that figure is rather higher than the median age of 45 that CRMA offers in its presentation (CRMA, "City and Regional Magazine Association 2010").

²⁹ Sivek, "City Magazine Editors."

³⁰ Gene Burd, "The Mediated Metropolis as Medium and Message," *International Communication Gazette* 70, no. 3-4 (2008): 209-22, doi:10.1177/1748048508089948.

³¹ Ibid., 217.

³² Ibid., 213.

³³ Carrie Buchanan, "A More National Representation of Place in Canadian Daily Newspapers," *The Canadian Geographer* 58, no. 4 (2014): 517-30, doi:10.1111/cag.12104.

³⁴ See, for example: Karen Grandy, "The Glossy Ceiling: Coverage of Women in Canadian and American Business Magazines," *Journal of Magazine & New Media Research* 14, no. 1 (2013); Catherine Luther and Jodi Rightler-McDaniels, "'More Trouble than the Good Lord Ever Intended': Representations of Interracial Marriage in U.S. News-Oriented Magazines," *Journal of Magazine & New Media Research* 14, no. 1 (2013); María Len-Ríos, Shelly Rodgers, Esther Thorson, and Doyle Yoon, "Representation of Women in News and Photos: Comparing Content to Perceptions," *Journal of Communication* 55, no. 1 (2005): 152-68, doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2005.tb02664.x; Deborah Martin, "Constructing Place: Cultural Hegemonies and Media Images of an Inner-city Neighborhood," *Urban Geography* 21, no. 5 (2000): 380-405, doi:10.2747/0272-3638.21.5.380.

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³⁸ Gerald Goggin, Fiona Martin, and Tim Dwyer, "Locative News," *Journalism Studies* 16, no. 1 (2014): 41-59, doi:10.1080/1461670X.2014.890329.

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⁴⁰ Sivek, "City Magazines and Social Media"; Sivek, "City Magazine Editors."

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⁴⁹Marcus Funk, "Imagined Commodities? Analyzing Local Identity and Place in American Community Newspaper Website Banners," *New Media & Society* 15, no. 4 (2013): 574-95, doi:10.1177/1461444812458433.

⁵⁰Machin, "Building the World's Visual Language."

⁵¹Sivek, "City Magazine Editors."

⁵²Edie and Knight, "Public/Private Service," 527.

⁵³Sivek, "City Magazines and Social Media."

⁵⁴Kristy Hess, "Breaking Boundaries," *Digital Journalism* 1, no. 1 (2012): 58, doi:10.1080/21670811.2012.714933.