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Journal of Magazine Media, Volume 16, Number 1, Fall 2015, (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jmm.2015.0004>

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The Future of the Magazine Form: Digital Transformation, Print Continuity

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The advent of the World Wide Web in the 1990s marked the true dawn of the Digital Age, in part because the disruptions it fostered have clearly had profound implications across the entire information ecosystem. And while it can be argued that the business of magazines has suffered somewhat less from the paradigm tremors than other media, for many magazine professionals that may, at best, be lukewarm comfort.

Since the mid-1990s, existing magazines have experimented with using the web as a companion to the print product. In addition, new business models are being tested, of which the most important result may be the impact on the production processes. With all this technologically driven change, a telling question comes easily to mind: whither the magazine form? I have on offer a half-dozen ways to answer the question.

1. Magazine as Art Form

Perhaps we should start by asking what is unique about magazines—for doing so might lead to clues about what lies over the horizon. It was Victor Navasky who, in 2007, captured one of the central truisms: magazines, he said, are “an art form, not just a delivery method.”¹ Navasky, calling on the wisdom of a seventeenth-century English philosopher, further wrote:

At the loftiest level, one might think of magazines as what Francis Bacon meant when he referred to as “the middle axiom.” Magazines as a genre do not specialize in abstract generalities; nor, at the other extreme, do they present raw, undigested experience. Rather, their comparative advantage is in dealing with the in-between—the middle region, inhabited, according to Bacon, by “the solid and living axioms on which depend the affairs and fortunes of humankind.”²

Bacon derived his “middle axiom” almost a century before today’s magazine form existed, but it can easily be applied for comparative purposes. Magazines reside in what may be considered a “privileged position”³—more detailed and interpretive than newspapers, but somewhat less reflective and comprehensive yet more accessible than books.

2. Platform Evolution

Skeptics about the future of the magazine form, particularly that which is printed on paper, are easy to find. Dismal predictions are the currency of the realm. “Magazines, as we know them, are dying,” wrote David Renard, author of a 2006 book appropriately entitled *The Last Magazine*.⁴ Opinions like these appear to be most fervently held by those moved by what David Nye called the “technological sublime”⁵—a sense of wonder and awe in the presence of new technologies, along with the belief that technological advances are ultimately irresistible.

Clearly, the digital revolution has provided new delivery platforms such as the desktop computer, the tablet, and the smartphone, which many magazine publishers are trying to embrace. Further, most observers are quite certain that alternative means of digital delivery will continue to emerge.

Clearly, the magazine industry would be well-advised to find a fitting delivery system—one comfortably favored by its audience—in the brave new digital world. One example is *flexible screen* technology, which promises to mimic the tactility and portability of printed paper in a booklet of electronic pages that display downloaded content. “Such displays will have all the necessary electronics integrated into the display, with reader units having several pages bound together much like a magazine, with the binding housing the power supply, data storage and communications circuitry.”⁶

3. The Editorial Vineyards

Regardless of what technology prevails in the future, for magazines the advent of the digital age means (1) the effective removal of most space limitations, (2) the new display architectures required by new display formats, (3) the added value offered by hyperlinks and archival materials, and (4) the promise of reader interactivity.⁷ Driven by the new technologies, the magazine industry is also undergoing transformations in the workplace routines and processes through which magazines are editorially produced, altering not only required skill sets but also the working relationships within the editorial department.

But it must be noted that not everyone sees promise in the new possibilities. For some, there is a dark side to the new digital realities of the magazine editing profession. James Truman, once called the “crown prince” of the Condé Nast magazine publishing empire, was no doubt echoing the sentiments of other magazine professionals when he offered the following *cri de coeur*: “I think magazines are going to be somewhat like department stores. They’ll stay in business, but you’ll wonder why, since you get everything in them from other places, usually with a better customer experience.”⁸

4. Economic Issues

Magazines face two key economic quandaries that reflect the two distinct yet interrelated revenue streams, *advertising* and *circulation*. The first dilemma is whether the advertising-based business model—invented in the 1890s and profitably omnipresent through the end of the twentieth century—will continue to flourish in the future. The median cost-per-thousand for a one-time, one-page advertisement in an American consumer magazine today is approximately \$140; that is, \$140 for every thousand readers who had purchased the magazine. In comparison, the average equivalent on the web is less than half a cent.

Online advertising revenue is only a small fraction of that in print because readers rarely pay for online content. A printed consumer magazine, with its paid readership, does not have to prove to advertisers that the readers were interested in the content—including the accompanying advertisements. Caring enough to purchase the magazine amply demonstrates interest and commitment, which is why advertisers are willing to pay dearly for access to that consumer. In contrast, since online content is typically free to viewers, it is logical that advertisers are only willing to pay rates reduced by more than two orders of magnitude.

Which leads to the second essential question: given a possible decline in circulation revenue and general public expectation of free online content, would it be possible for magazines to erect paywalls that would produce a revenue stream from their online readership? Although there

remains a definitive answer to the question, many experiments such as *People's freemium*—a combination of free and premium content, with the reader being charged for the latter—are underway.⁹

5. Readers May Beg to Differ

Some have contended that emerging technologies have made it possible for magazines to create new and even more robust relationships with their readers. The argument claims that an enhanced interactivity via reader responses holds out the promise of an enriched sense of community and a deepened bond between the publication and its readers.

In the years since the beginning of the new millennium, a number of major magazine publishers attempted to take advantage of the above-presumed opportunities, but the results were quite modest and difficult to confidently quantify. Perhaps there is a fundamental misapprehension about the appetite for interactivity itself. As the Belgian scholar François Heinderyckx wrote: “One of the areas in which contentious predictions recur relates to the alleged antagonism between *passive* and *interactive* media. These distinctions generally take for granted that *passive* means outdated. In other words, the assumption is that legacy media are passive not by choice but because they could not, at the time they were conceived, be anything else.”¹⁰

But perhaps it is the *linearity* of print—and its apparent benefits to the reader—which is missing from most considerations. Embedded in a magazine’s editorial structure was a certain pace and flow that sets the tone for the reader’s experience, even when the publication was not read in lock-step from front to rear. As one observer has noted: The virtues of linearity are utterly overlooked. Linear media limit distractions and encourage attention, immersion, and precious opportunities for contemplation. Moreover, linear media may also be more likely to foster loyalty in an audience.¹¹

In sum, if one thinks seriously about readers with an appetite for the kind of material that is to be found in magazines, it becomes almost self-evident that the connection between reader and the publication is a function of *content* rather than *technology*. Although social media allows a person to share stories piecemeal, this may or may not result in additional audiences. Indeed, magazines claim a place in their readers’ lives because, in the well-chosen words of one magazine editor, the unwavering editorial imperative is to present—report, edit, design, and deliver—“stories that brilliantly answer a latent question and meet a curiosity readers didn’t know they had.”¹²

6. The Calculus of Success

Based on the unique relationship between the publications and their readers, I am hopeful about the continuing survival of the magazine form in the digital age. In the fragmenting media world of more and more niches, the magazine form appears to be viable in both the print and digital realms. And my best guess is that the print version, by virtue of its legacy status, will not disappear.

Researching the questions related to the viability of these two platforms, as well as the ways in which magazine editors can take advantage of the new technological possibilities, will be a central task for magazine professionals in the coming decades. In an effort to acknowledge and

perhaps foreground the economic challenges which, intensified by technological change, now face the magazine profession, there might be some value in proposing a *Special Theory of Magazines*. It states: The dominant formula for magazine success in print or online, or both, is to provide specific information of clear perceived value to a definable readership (1) willing to pay for the information and (2) on whom advertisers want to focus their market efforts. Magazine practitioners and publishers who can meet the demands of the special theory are likely to not just survive but flourish.

It may serve only as oblique evidence, but even in the rarified precincts of the twenty-first century New Age digiterati—imagine, for example, the technocentric world of the TED conferences—the magazine form will still find a way to earn its keep, resonating with readers in powerful ways. Even Emily McManus, who oversees the TED.com website, seemed to agree when asked recently for her underlying organizing principle. “We actually try,” she said, “to be a magazine.”¹³

Author’s Note: The text above is an abridged adaptation of the concluding chapter of David Abrahamson and Marcia Prior-Miller, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Magazine Research: The Future of the Magazine Form* (New York: Routledge, 2015). © 2015. All rights reserved.

End Notes

¹ Victor S. Navasky, "Editorial Note," *New York Review of Magazines* (New York: Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, 2007), 1, <http://archives.jrn.columbia.edu/nyrm/2007/ednote.html>, accessed November 10, 2010.

² Victor S. Navasky and Evan Cornog, eds., *The Art of Making Magazines: On Being an Editor and Other Views from the Industry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), viii.

³ David Abrahamson, "Magazine Exceptionalism: The Concept, the Criteria, the Challenge," *Journalism Studies* 8, no. 4 (2007): 669.

⁴ David Renard, ed., *The Last Magazine* (New York: Universe Publishing, 2006), 14.

⁵ David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), ix. The author graciously credited Leo Marx, a professor at Amherst College during his undergraduate days in the 1960s, with first introducing him to the concept.

⁶ Nick Hampshire, "The E-Paper Catalyst," in David Renard, ed., *The Last Magazine* (New York, Universe Publishing, 2006), 33.

⁷ Karen Rupp-Serrano, "From Gutenberg to Gigabytes: The Electronic Periodical Comes of Age," *American Periodicals* 4 (1994): 102.

⁸ Quoted in Jacob Bernstein, "A Crown Prince in a New Kingdom," *New York Times*, August 18, 2013, 11.

⁹ "Reading Between the Lines," *Economist*, March 26, 2009, http://www.economist.com/node/13362043/print?story_id=13362043, accessed March 31, 2009.

¹⁰ François Heinderyckx, "In Praise of the Passive Media," in Ilija Tomanić Trivundža, Nico Carpentier, Hannu Nieminen, Pille Pruulmann-Venerfeldt, Richard Kilborn, Ebba Sundin, and Tobias Olsson, eds., *Past, Future and Change: Contemporary Analysis of Evolving Media Scapes* (Ljubljana, Slovenia: University of Ljubljana Press, 2013), 100.

¹¹ Heinderyckx, "In Praise of the Passive Media," 106.

¹² Ben Smith, "What the Longform Backlash Is All About," *Journalism, Deliberated*, January 26, 2014, <https://medium.com/journalism-deliberated/958f4e7691f5>, accessed March 20, 2014.

¹³ Quoted in Nathan Heller, "Listen and Learn," *New Yorker*, July 9, 2012, 73.