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Book Review: History of Early American Magazines Repeating Itself

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The Rise and Fall of Early American Magazine Culture. Jared Gardner. University of Illinois Press, 2012. 224 pp. hardcover.

Early American magazines, much like silent cinema, are frequently misconceived as primitive, argues Jared Gardner in *The Rise and Fall of Early American Magazine Culture*; yet, they are rich in historical and literary context. The book charts the trajectory of 18th- and 19th-century periodicals, and persuasively compares it to today's new media evolution—from a cacophonous, unpaid, and anonymous public sphere to a more profit-driven and less democratic space.

Gardner draws several parallels between early magazine culture and the Internet. Initially seen as literary museums, early American periodicals aimed to put on display divergent ideas and contributions. The haphazardness of this approach was inherent in the word “magazine,” which came into use in the 16th century as a term referring to a commercial warehouse. Gardner describes the early American periodicals as “radically inclusive,” offering an interactive space in which participants were both authors and readers—very much like in the modern culture of social media, blogs, and online comments. Early magazine writers were unpaid volunteers who used pseudonyms and occasionally constructed literary avatars (i.e., a woman writing as a man) through regular contributions. From virtual storehouses of ideas, early magazines grew to be seen as virtual coffeehouses, where one would go for comfort and a good conversation, even though the virtual interaction was asynchronous and slow. A parallel with current digital culture can also be found in early magazines' “remix” of content from other sources, serving—much like modern blogs—as “the means for participating in a perpetually replenishing commons.”

Yet another major theme running through the book is the political role of the periodical. Gardner sees the magazine form as federalism's first draft, tracing the original motto of the United States, E Pluribus Unum (Latin for “one from many”) to the periodical culture of the 18th century. The phrase first appeared on the volume title page of *The Gentleman's Magazine*, referring to the binding of individual issues, but was also used in the short-lived *New-England Magazine*, edited by Benjamin Franklin's nephew and protégé Benjamin Mecom. Gardner argues that in the latter case, the use of the E Pluribus Unum motto and symbol referred specifically to “the various ‘queer notions’ within the pages

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of the magazine ... held in place by the firm and ruffled hand of the editor,” and, in that sense, it served as “an ideal model for the social contract required by the new nation.”

A living and changeable document, the early magazine was intended to reflect the will and the voices of the people in a utopian “literary republic,” open to all political viewpoints. Only a couple of decades into the 19th century, that philosophy had become obsolete. Magazines started to become profitable, more specialized (including politically), written by well-paid contributors, and managed by editors who arrogantly refused readers’ contributions and even ridiculed them publicly.

The striking public mindedness of the early periodical culture comes across in yet another important theme, the competition between the magazine and the novel as two parallel literary forms, with the periodical dominating the fray until about the 1820s. Early American novels, often structured in epistolary form, resembled periodicals by combining multiple voices and fragments, organized by an author whose function was closer to that of an editor than a narrator who constructed a coherent story. This approach offered readers more freedom of interpretation, along with creating an illusion of factuality at a time when many novels were criticized for being sentimental and untrue to real life, with much potential to mislead their (mostly) young female readers. Some early American novelists, including Susanna Rowson and Charles B. Brown, might have been quite convinced of the superiority of the periodical form because they abandoned their book writing for anonymous and profitless magazine work at the end of their careers. Gardner argues that this was very much a choice for Rowson and Brown rather than a decision necessitated by their circumstances.

While *The Rise and Fall of Early American Magazines* may be a difficult read for most undergraduate students, it is likely to be useful to graduate students and scholars of journalism history. For all mass communication scholars, the book offers much food for thought in depicting an 18th-century version of an inclusive public sphere, where semi-anonymous voices engaged in an ongoing virtual conversation without seeking recognition or profits.