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The post-digital literary journal: media and funding implications

Abstract:

Literary journals are post-digital publications, where digital and print media blend and shape one another. They play an important role in Australian literary culture, but rely on funding to survive. Recent discourse about funding Australian literary journals has been characterised by debates about publication media: print and digital. With the upcoming establishment of a new body for writing in Australia, 'Writing Australia', this study examines literary journals' relationships with these media, and how editors' use of these media affects the operations and economics of their publications, and the field as a whole. The study finds that federal project funding is unsuited to the type of work that literary journals do, as well as evidence of an increasingly entrenched two-tier field, where journals with operational backing from institutions like universities are more competitive than their smaller, unsupported counterparts in obtaining existing funding. While digital publication has many advantages for literary journals, skills shortages in digital publishing, marketing, and data analysis limit the scope of some journals to demonstrate their reach and effectiveness. The study finds that print publication remains important, particularly for writers, and that the community-building capacity of literary journals is a highly significant contribution which, while not evidenced on the page or screen, should be given weight in assessments of journals' success.

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Keywords:

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Introduction

Australian literary journals, or literary magazines, are periodicals in print and online that showcase new works from Australian and international writers, support emerging authors and enhance the nation's literary scene. As such, literary journals are the engines of literary culture in Australia (Alice, 2023b), but they are often overlooked in arts policy-making, despite needing funding support to survive. Literary journals are post-digital. That is, they are hybrids of 'old' and 'new' media (Cramer, 2015). The ways these media are used in literary journals are in many ways tied to their economic circumstances and, for at least 15 years, questions about funding Australian literary journals have been associated with questions about publishing media – about the ways online or print publication are more valuable, functional, or economical in relation to one another (Smith, 2017). Since the beginning of the 21st century, the literary journal field in Australia has been marked by what Emmet Stinson calls “industrial and conceptual turbulence”, in large part due to the arrival of new technologies combined with persistent funding shortfalls (2013, p. ix). Industrial turbulence includes developments in processes, business models, and distribution networks arising from new technologies, while conceptual turbulence can be found in the complex relationships between past and present, old and new, physical and digital, played out through print and digital media and the ways editors, writers, and readers interact with these media. These issues have implications for income and expenditure and, after a long period of defunding in the field, have been animated by the consultation and launch of *Revive*, Australia's new cultural policy (2023).

Despite this recent period of turbulent change, lack of movement in the policy environment that supports the literary journal field has affected editors' ability to meet challenges and seize opportunities. *Revive* acknowledges that “new technology is disrupting the landscape for musicians and writers and there is a need for government policy to be modernised for these artists”. (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023, p. 68). The pressing need to adjust policies to this disruption has played a role in the planned establishment of Writing Australia by 2025, a new body set to serve the entire literary sphere in Australia, “from writer to literary journal to writers centre” (Alice, 2023a). As Alice also notes, this is perhaps “the most progressive literature policy Australia has had since the creation of the Literature Board in the 1970s” (Alice, 2023b). It is an opportunity not to be missed.

For years, literature has been among the Australia Council's (now Creative Australia) poorest funded artforms, and has been “radically overlooked” (Boland, 2020), and “underfunded relative to other artforms for decades” (Menzies-Pike, 2023, p. 23). Within the literary sphere in Australia, literary journals inhabit the lowest rungs on the funding and status ladders and as small (often micro), ephemeral organisations—with few staff and small sales and readerships—are often the literary organisations that feel funding cuts most keenly. *Revive* itself describes literary journals as “principally underfunded” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023, p. 17).

Ongoing fallout from the technological revolution of the early 2000s, combined with the launch of *Revive*, Australia's first national cultural policy in a decade, some twenty years later, have

therefore brought the Australian literary field to an inflection point in terms of policy, structure, and sentiment. This moment of inflection and the promised revival provides an opportunity to examine some of the value placed in different media within a small but important field in Australia's literary ecosystem. Understanding how and why editors make choices about publication media (so important to revenue and expenditure as well as journals' goals) can provide guidance for policy-makers and for the yet-to-be-formed structures (such as Writing Australia) that support literary journals. For *TEXT* readers, the following analysis aims to contextualise literary journals in the 2020s and contribute to the ongoing record of the support and challenges confronting some of our most enduring and impactful literary institutions. What are the relationships that editors, writers, and readers have to different publishing media, their material and symbolic qualities, and their practical and economic advantages? What understandings may help funding bodies and policy-makers design better grants, support skills development, and collect helpful data that enable these "engines of literary culture" to thrive?

Methods and data

There has been very little scholarship on the funding and the policy implications of Australian literary journals' shifting material boundaries. This study draws on two key sources of data that are the two most recent, comprehensive studies of the Australian literary journal field: Menzies-Pike & Ryan's *Literary Journals in Australia: Report prepared for the Australia Council of the Arts* (2023), and my PhD thesis: *Materiality and Media: Australian literary journals in the post-digital publishing ecology* (2017), both of which pay particular attention to editors' media strategies and questions of funding. An industry report and a PhD thesis, there is a risk that these studies' data and findings might go unnoticed in scholarly circles at a pivotal time for the study of Australian writing in general, and literary journals in particular. While conducted six years apart, both have relevant learnings to contribute to our understanding of literary journals' position in the arts funding landscape in Australia: both respond to digital technology, political and funding conditions, and draw on primary source material from editors working in the field.

The two studies make use of semi-structured interviews with editors of literary journals. As Menzies-Pike & Ryan note, "journal editors are eloquent advocates for and explicators of their work" (2023, p. 3). For this reason, semi-structured interviews have been used to investigate the literary journal field since it became a subject of enquiry in the 1970s. For example, Paling and Nilan's 2006 study employed semi-structured interviews to explore how editors of literary journals adopted and used technology, and in both 1977 and 1981, *Australian Literary Studies* used semi-structured interviews to map literary journal editors' attitudes, goals, challenges and ideals (Hergenhan, 1977, 1981). Literary journal editors frequently work alone or in small teams and are almost solely responsible for decisions regarding the deployment of funds and choices about media in their journals (often these decisions are interrelated), so are able to give detailed and wide-ranging explanations of the challenges and opportunities these choices entail.

Menzies-Pike & Ryan recruited widely, drawing on results from 29 survey respondents and 22 interview respondents (2023), while my 2017 study maps the field of approximately 17 journals at the time, and draws on 11 interviews with then literary journal editors (Smith, 2017). The

samples of the two studies have five journals in common, but only one editor interview participant in common. A few of the journals I investigated in 2017 have since folded or taken hiatus, while most of the editors interviewed at that time have since moved on. Burnout in the Australian literary journal field is well-documented both in my research (2017) and in Menzies-Pike & Ryan (2023), as well as other sources, such as Edmonds' *Tilting at Windmills* (2015). While beyond the scope of this study, the high rate of burnout among editorial staff working on literary journals indicates a talent diaspora in a field characterised by precarity and long hours, often given voluntarily or for remuneration far below the national average wage. Addressing structural funding and policy shortfalls would better support these arts workers to continue contributing to writing in Australia. Menzies-Pike & Ryan's report makes helpful recommendations urging fair pay for workers in the field (2023).

Literary journals in context

Literary journals can be defined as independent magazines (Le Masurier, 2012) that emphasise the publication of new, quality writing, and the support of authors and the literary community. Literary journals publish a wide variety of writing and writing-related content, including short fiction, essays, creative non-fiction, reviews, poetry, and interviews. This content can extend beyond the page or the screen, through podcasts, workshops, and events (Smith, 2017, p. 54).

Literary journals are often produced cheaply and on a very small scale (Edmonds, 2015), at times relying on the work of a single editor and often the work of small teams of fewer than half a dozen people. Typically, literary journals seek to identify new voices or bring marginalised voices to the fore (Alice, 2023b; Edmonds, 2015; Smith, 2017), and often aim to publish new and innovative work, as well as work that responds to current issues and events, particularly because journals can publish quickly and frequently compared to traditional book publishing (Menzies-Pike, 2023). As Megan Le Masurier points out, magazines (including literary journals) “arise out of a perceived need in a particular time and place”. In meeting these needs, which can be social, political, cultural and/or economic, they both “reflect and shape society and culture” (2014).

In Australia, the place of literary journals in cultural life has undergone a substantial evolution. They emerged with cheaper printing in the late 1800s, beginning as miscellanies that reflected their colonial context, and over the next sixty or so years were dominated by a masculine, nationalist agenda, promoted by titles such as *The Bulletin* throughout its 128-year history (Bennett, 2001, 1981). In the 1970s, Australian literary journals began to flourish with new diversity, reflecting progressive government policy, the women's movement, countercultural movement, and waves of immigration, making way for new and varied voices in Australian literature (Bennett, 1981). By the 1990s, anxiety about funding began to dominate debate in the field, soon joined by discourses about publication media (Smith, 2017), which continues today. The history of literary journals still carries significance, both in maintaining traditions in specific journals (such as *Overland*, which continues a radical tradition), and in the contemporary positions of journals in relation to the past. *Liminal*, for example, counters the masculine, white, middle-class legacy of the field, writing back against colonialism by

supporting First Nations writers and writers of colour (*Liminal*, 2023). In Australia, literary journals have evolved with ties to place. *Southerly*, for example, was associated with Sydney, while *Westerly* with Western Australia, and *Island* with Tasmania.

Australian literary journals have also been connected to universities, which provide in-kind support in the form of office space, or other forms of funding such as wages. *The Sydney Review of Books* is housed at Western Sydney University, while *Meanjin* is an imprint of Melbourne University Publishing. Support from universities for some journals exerts significant influence in the field as it has given rise to two classes of literary journal: those whose staff receive salaries and who can rely on some operational security, and those who rely largely on funding (much of which is tied up in one-off, project grants), and/or labour and resources volunteered by enthusiastic editors. As this study demonstrates, this gap is widening, as grants and policies designed to support many artforms fail to capture the contribution or needs of smaller (and often most innovative) journals, which find it impossible to compete with their university-supported “rivals”.

Today, Australian literary journals are post-digital publications. And while disruption from the likes of artificial intelligence is surely underway, print and digital publication need no longer be regarded as ‘old’ and ‘new’ media (Cramer, 2015), but are blended and exploited by editors for their practical, literary, and economic advantages. Print and online publication also intermediate one another – that is, they create meaning through the relationship they have to each other and to the embodied world (Hayles, 2007). Editors of literary journals make choices about publishing in print, online, or both to create value for readers and writers, position themselves in regards to the market and the rest of the field, and of course, to attract funding.

“Hunger Games”: Literary journals and funding

Funding has always been a fraught issue for literary journals. Writing in 1995, Bev Roberts asserted that literary journals had been “problematic for funding bodies for more than forty years” (Roberts, 1995, p. 187). They are no less problematic now. Journals in Australia exist in a near-permanent state of financial crisis, and this crisis has been particularly marked since the 1990s, with its roots in policy decisions about arts funding generally, and the ways policy-makers chose to frame ideas such as impact, value and innovation. In 1994, Paul Keating’s Labor government released the *Creative Nation* policy, which emphasised the economic potential of cultural industries and the arts (Department of Communications and the Arts, 1994). Tracing the history of impact and value of the arts over the last thirty years in Australia, Gattenhof (2017) demonstrates the ways in which, beginning with the *Creative Nation* policy, value has been tied to innovation. Gattenhof describes how innovation, an idea loosely connected with arts and creativity, evolved to tie the arts to economic concepts such as productivity and income generation. Over time, the use of such market-driven language (encapsulated by the term *impact*) in policy discourse (Belfiore, 2015) eclipsed the broader contributions of the arts and humanities. Furthermore, decisions about funding the arts in Australia are often political. Caust demonstrates the deeply tangled nature of politics and arts funding in Australia and globally, and singles out ideological funding decisions made by

Coalition governments in the late 2010s that favoured large, established arts organisations at the expense of small, emerging organisations (such as literary journals) and individuals, such as writers (2017).

In this environment, economic rationalism and the innovation policies that sought to find impact in the form of economic outcomes favoured artforms that could provide metrics such as ticket sales, and quantify success by, for example, staging blockbuster events. Such outcomes are, of course, out of the reach of small literary organisations quietly publishing printed journals. By 2020, three-fifths of federal arts funding was awarded to large performing arts companies such as Opera Australia and The Australian Ballet, leaving very little funding to share among medium and small (let alone micro) organisations that contribute richly to Australia's most vibrant arts, creativity, and cultural scenes (Eltham, 2020). At the same time, literature's share of this funding dwindled.

Writing in literary journal *Meanjin* in 2023, Jessica Alice, CEO of Writers SA and Chair of the Arts Industry Council of South Australia, notes that funding decay continued throughout the 2010s and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Morrison government's 2020 Restart Investment to Sustain and Expand (RISE) fund was introduced to support the arts sector, offering grants for new projects. The hastily implemented RISE funding failed to "trickle down to literature" (2023b) and the resulting funding squeeze gave rise to a dynamic that *Island* magazine editors have since called "a 'Hunger Games' scenario" (Island magazine, 2022). "A key challenge for Writing Australia", writes Alice, "will be to repair the damage done to [literary journals], through restoring their funding and enabling growth." (Alice, 2023b). Menzies-Pike & Ryan's recent report makes recommendations that, if implemented, will support the evaluation of the broad cultural impact of literary journals, including data-driven metrics that might be used to support them. The report recommends that –

Writing Australia develop a framework for auditing the cultural impact of literary journals in a given year, including such metrics as total number of authors published, number of first-time authors published, diversity of authors published, book deals and other commissions that arise as a consequence of publication in literary journals, invitations to teach, appear at events and collaborate that arise as a consequence of publication in literary journals. (Menzies-Pike & Ryan, 2023, p. 32).

Furthermore, just as metrics applied across many artforms have failed the literary sector, particularly literary journals, so did the design of Australia Council grants. In the last eight years, the chief federal funding for literary journals has been either project funding, or four-year funding. Of these, project funding is the least suitable, though most accessible grant type. Menzies-Pike & Ryan demonstrate that small literary journals are unable to compete with larger publications, many of which are supported by universities, for project funding (2023, p. 25), and editors discuss how their needs differ from organisations who run project activities, like exhibitions and performances. As Hollen Singleton, editor of *Going Down Swinging*, says

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project-based grants want outcomes. They want you to tell them what exciting, shiny thing you want to do ... a lot of our really cool stuff is not flashy and shiny ... here's a fiction piece, here's a poem ... it's a harder thing to sell to a funding body. (Personal communication, as cited in Menzie-Pike & Ryan, 2023, p. 29.)

As far back as 2008, Ommundsen & Jacklin alerted The Australia Council to the “arms-race outcome” of “dissimilar organisations with distinct objectives and operations” competing for the same funding (2008, p. 152). They observe that this approach can lead to redundant outcomes and resource dilution, and suggest that introducing a mechanism in the grant application process that “acknowledged collaboration, partnerships and the sharing of resources might go some way towards relieving the stress this system produces” (2008, p. 152). In a similar vein, in 2023, Menzies-Pike & Ryan recommend that Writing Australia support online workshops for small journals to share skills, alongside broader mentoring programs for editors and a working group for university-based literary journals to share practice and learnings.

The digital solution?

The digital revolution collided with two decades of arts funding policies that had starved small, literary arts organisations, raising inevitable questions about whether print publication was worth the expense. By the 2010s, this collision caused furore that spread to mainstream media, particularly when Melbourne University Press suggested moving *Meanjin* from print to online publication (Craven, 2010; Steger, 2010). Digital publishing has often since been pointed out as a solution for literary journals that both offers growth and makes the most of limited funding. In their recent survey and interviews with literary journal editors in Australia, Menzies-Pike & Ryan (2023) report a “broad consensus” that “online publication is cheap, accessible and flexible” (p. 19), and that it helps journals publish more writers, reduce subscription costs, and connect with international readers while saving on postage (2023). Still, in today’s “post-digital” environment (Cramer, 2015), funding bodies and policy-makers should note that digital publishing also has complexities, and advantages and disadvantages, just like print.

Understandings of these complexities are developing as research into the contemporary literary journal field develops. What seemed like a solution to funding problems in the early 2000s is unlikely to save much money, and “calls to send literary journals online to save money on production costs are misguided” (Smith, 2017, p. 117). While readers expect to pay for print subscriptions, my PhD research found a strong assumption that digital material from Australian literary journals should be free (Smith, 2017, pp. 118-119), digital publication does not necessarily save time compared with print (Laird, 2011), and funding bodies should be aware that advantages to digital publication are counterbalanced by “a disconnect between the pressure to go digital, and the resources required to actually do that properly” (Menzies-Pike & Ryan, 2023, p. 21).

Benjamin Laird, a former editor of *Cordite Poetry Review*, explained in 2011 how competing in the digital realm had increased the labour required to produce and promote a journal by an order of magnitude –

Running a quarterly literary journal in 2011 means doing everything you did twenty years ago, plus updating Facebook regularly, tweeting constantly, creating or sourcing blog content, building websites that support multiple devices, producing video content, making podcasts, publishing the journal in multiple formats, writing a regular e-newsletter, and, on top of all this, coordinating these efforts. With funding bodies now expecting this output, this model is the new baseline. (Laird, 2011)

Furthermore, much of this work is not taken into account by funding bodies because there is an assumption that much of the productivity in the digital sphere is automated, or it is concealed by the screens and devices that mediate the reading experience. In a 2016 interview, for example, Jacinta Woodhead, then editor of *Overland*, stated that digital publishing masked the labour behind digital outputs, with funders assuming –

that you don't need those resources and you don't need the staff and you don't need to pay writers as much – which is just extraordinary really – to think that you don't need an infrastructure for publishing [online] ... I think it's because their labour is hidden. (Personal communication, as cited in Smith, 2017, p. 117)

A key recommendation of Menzies-Pike & Ryan's 2023 report is fair wages for literary journal workers, and considerations of this recommendation must take into account the 'hiddenness' of the labour behind digital publishing if literary journals are to have the resources to survive in the highly competitive online market.

Perhaps the most important feature of digital publications is that when they are free, it can immensely lower barriers to publication (for writers) and access (for readers) relative to print, making writing available to underserved groups. Leah Jing McIntosh of *Liminal* magazine argues that open access digital publication is an important way of connecting with diverse readers, saying "when you do anti-racist work, it's important to lower the barriers to access. If you have a focus on community, but your community can't access the journal or work you're publishing, what's the point?" (personal communication, as cited in Menzies-Pike & Ryan, 2023, p. 19). Similarly, in their review of recent literature on Australian literary journals, Morrison et al. suggest that opportunities to engage with diverse cultures, languages, and voices, including Indigenous voices, might be "best expressed in a digital realm", presumably also for reasons of accessibility (2019, pp. 17-18). It must be noted, however, that subscriptions and cover sales are a vital revenue stream (Menzies-Pike & Ryan, 2023, p. 18), so free digital access comes at an economic cost, such that the business models that literary journal editors have to choose from present a catch-22 scenario: paywall online content to preserve cover sales (if a print edition exists) or to earn some revenue, restricting access and lowering potential readerships, or enjoy expanded reach from free and open digital access, eschewing the income. Emmet Stinson remarks that "no viable market-based model exists for the literary magazine" (2015), and indeed, both digital and print publishing choices complicate, rather than complete, business models.

This complexity can, in some part be overcome by strategies such as periodic unlocking of paywalled content, but this increases the work involved in web management and promotion of the unlocked pieces which, as indicated above, is time-consuming for a mostly volunteer workforce, and part of the hidden labour of running a journal. The multitude of tools available to journals in the post-digital age, while no doubt increasing the opportunities of all journals, has also increased competition for a limited pool of funds (Edmonds, 2012, p. 59). This has widened the gap between established, better funded, often university-backed publications (which often also publish a print edition) and smaller, micro-organisations (which are often digital) that must compete with them (p. 59). Despite being older, more tied to tradition, and potentially less agile than smaller and newer literary journals, these more robust organisations have more resources, which can allow them to take advantage of marketing opportunities and publish more content online in more complex ways. Small and micro literary journals often bring new ideas to the field, experimentation, and daring that are the hallmarks of the genre, so it is a shame that many are unable to reach their potential, succumbing to funding shortfalls and editor burnout within a couple of years of launch.

There have been few suggestions about possible solutions to this two-tier economy. In 1995, Bev Roberts, having completed a review of the literary journal field for the Australia Council for the Arts, suggested that focusing resources on a small selection of literary journals, rather than spreading limited funding thinly, which she called "schemes of euthanasia", could maximise their contribution to Australian cultural vitality (pp. 187–190). Roberts took issue with the expectation of continuing funding for a small collection of "grand monthlies" claiming nearly half of the funding allocated to the then magazine's program. These large, established journals had developed an expectation of ongoing support, and were –

to the Australia Council's Literature budget what the large, 'flagship' companies have been to the Performing Arts budget: 'locked-in clients' claiming the major share of funds as of right, and preventing the provision of support for smaller, newer claimants. (Roberts, 1995, p. 189)

It could be argued that a similar dynamic persists today, where large, established journals are winning the lion's share of very scarce funding, and of course, the more a journal is supported, the more competitive it becomes, particularly in the digital realm's ever-expanding set of tools and tasks in the development and publication of content. Between 2016 and 2023, federal funding was given to 11 literary journals (although others may have received Australia Council Funds via parent organisations) (Creative Australia, 2023). Of these, seven received some form of institutional support, either from larger arts organisations or universities. All are large enough to be adept at gaining funding from philanthropic and state government sources, too – they need to, to survive. While Roberts goes on to argue that "sacred cows" should be turned out into the paddock to "fend for themselves" (p. 190), today, the field is smaller and operating on already insufficient income, so the question is really about how policy can adjust to support both large, established and small, emerging organisations. For example, this might be aided by mapping available funding through to state and local governments and making resources

available for micro-organisations, supporting communities of interest for editors, creating mentoring programs and providing skills development, particularly for digital startups.

The power of digital to reach more readers is undeniable. While it appears that print readerships have grown very little since the 1990s, hovering around a few thousand (Roberts, 1995; Smith, 2017; Menzies-Pike, 2023), digital editions are finding more readers, with several journals reporting pageviews over 50,000 per month (similar to mainstream special interest magazines), and many others reaching readers in the tens of thousands (Menzies-Pike & Ryan, 2023, pp. 13–14). Unfortunately, a lack of skills, funding and time prevents organisations from fully tapping the potential of digital publishing, digital audience development and digital marketing. In 2017, literary journal editors' time and skills in marketing and analysis of such data were identified as major limiters (Smith, 2017, pp. 172–173). In 2019, Morrison et al. (2019) suggested that more quantitative data should be collected to evaluate the success of Australian literary journals (p. 17). In 2023, Menzies-Pike & Ryan noted that “most organisations have not undertaken any systematic monitoring or analysis of their audiences” and point out that this lack of information will prevent journals and Writing Australia from building a strong case for journals' reach, effectiveness, and influence (p. 13). This compelling evidence that support is needed in systems, processes, and skills to collect and analyse data may give Writing Australia cause to think outside the funding box. There may be value, for example, in skills development programs for editors, such as business mentoring or buddy programs, workshops and seminars, or a community of interest where editors can share practice and knowledge. There is also opportunity to create a suite of standard, recommended metrics that would help journals understand their readerships and funders compare like with like.

Romance with print

Alongside the practical considerations of readership and revenue, editors of literary journals consider material and symbolic factors when making decisions about publication media. As Carlin & Mason's study of small Australian independent magazines finds, “aesthetic desire” is a strong motivator for working in print (2017, p. 201). Menzies-Pike & Ryan (2023) echo my PhD research (2017) in noting that despite the immense role digital tools play in democratising and powering the field, print remains important for both editors and writers –

print is still highly significant to organisations, to writers and to readers. Even as media convergence and cost propel organisations towards publishing more of their program online and undertaking more organisational and editorial work in digital environments, many organisations continue to invest in print publication and distribution. Many editors spoke to us about their attachment to print publication and the significance of being in print for writers. Although almost all the organisations we spoke to publish online, being in print is a genuine milestone for authors. (Menzies-Pike & Ryan, 2023, p. 17)

This view is also shared by editors of independent magazines for whom “factors and motivations” such as the legitimacy of print, its saleability, and its haptic qualities “weighed against the financial cost of print production”, which can be up to 10 times that of web

publication (Carlin & Mason, 2017, p. 201). Further, Morrison et al. observe that “many Australian literary journals do not appear to be fully embracing the digital world, despite its potentially lower costs, but rather continue to entertain a romance with print, which remains highly valued for its haptic qualities and sense of literary worth” (2019, pp. 17–18). How the value of print is constructed and symbolised bears scrutiny, particularly as it relates to the economics of literary journals – factors such as prestige and aesthetics, which may not have a dollar value, clearly influence decision-making in the field.

Le Masurier (2012) suggests that the resurgence of print is linked to digital technology, noting that the “renewal of the impulse to make magazines independently and in print” in the 21st century has been “facilitated by the expansion of digital technologies and cultures” (Le Masurier, 2012, p. 385). User-friendly desktop publishing software such as Canva or Adobe InDesign and low-cost printing enable journals to be produced with minimal financial investment and without specialist skills. Simultaneously, access to self-build websites via platforms such as WordPress, and to marketing channels via social media platforms such as X, Facebook, and Instagram have made building readerships relatively simple.

Given the digital literacy required of editors of independent journals to create and sell their publications, Le Masurier (2012) questions why emerging editors would opt to publish in print – why choose “this expensive, environmentally wasteful medium ... that is both less easy and more costly to distribute than online publications, one that will necessarily reach far fewer readers and at a much slower speed?” (p. 393). Since digital publishing rose to become a viable alternative, print and digital media used in the literary journal field have entered a conversation with one another. One result of this “intermediation” (Hayles, 2007) has been an increase in print’s capacity to symbolise and communicate literary worth through its “haptic qualities”. Hayles argues that print readers, having experienced various media, now value the unique effects of books: “if anything, print readers relish all the more the media-specific effects of books precisely because they no longer take them for granted and have many other media experiences with which to compare them” (Hayles, 2005, p. 32). Eli Horowitz of *McSweeney’s* journal, a US publication known for exaggerated fetishisation of the printed object, suggests that the digital age “only intensifies the excitement” of physical objects (Horowitz, 2010, pp. 63–65). Although now on hiatus, *The Lifted Brow* was, between 2007 and 2020, an important literary journal in the Australian field and one known for emphasising the physical, tactile qualities of its printed version. Reviewing the publication in 2015, Katia Pase wrote that *The Lifted Brow* had “reintroduced the artefact-ness of the object ... lending weight to the content” (2015).

In the age of digital copies, scholars like Adler (2012), Bartmanski & Woodward (2015) and Schirmer (2014) have turned to Walter Benjamin’s notion of ‘aura’ (2018) to understand why analogue-seeming forms such as print hold such significance, and why these haptic qualities are being emphasised. Schiermer places print fetishisation within a youth culture that is “deeply committed to reviving the artifacts of previous generations” (2014, p. 168). According to Schiermer, the hipster culture that was a feature of the Millennial generation’s coming-of-age flourishes through “a collective exploration of the possibilities, potentialities, and aesthetics of

past eras” (p. 176). This often involves outdated media and technologies like typewriters, fixed-gear bicycles, polaroid cameras, and vinyl records, to which we could also add printed literary journals (Smith, 2017, p. 46). Schirmer revives Walter Benjamin’s concept of ‘aura’ – “in a culture ‘at its age of digital reproduction’ individualisation often goes hand-in-hand with a rescue of the singular and ‘auratic’ objects of the pre-digital past” (Schiermer, 2014, p. 176). Through this lens, print may appeal to both editors and readers because it retains an aura similar to that once associated with an artist’s original work in Benjamin’s era of mechanical reproduction. Printed media can be perceived as ersatz originals, whose existence is “the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (Benjamin, 2018).

But there is more than aura and intermediation at play. Print is also perceived by literary journal editors as creating space for deeper reading, and a more engaged aesthetic experience. Editors define ‘literary’ work by emphasising the importance of quality over specific genre categories (such as fantasy or romance), and as writing that immerses the reader in the writer’s world of ideas and emotions (Smith, 2017, pp. 55–56). According to editors, publication media can influence the aesthetic experience of reading. While some associate the digital realm with interruption and a superficial style of reading, print seems to offer a venue for deeper engagement with a text, which editors see as particularly important for reading fiction (Smith, 2017, p. 129). It appears that print is valued by some as a sanctuary for the contemplation and appreciation of “literature”, protected from online distraction. As one editor states –

I still think print is far and away the best medium for reading short fiction (or any fiction, for that matter.) People’s reading habits online (my own included) are not conducive to the deep reading required to truly appreciate fiction ... online is a noisy place to try to peddle the quiet required for good fiction. (Personal communication, as cited in Smith, 2017, p. 129)

Tangible qualities, auratic power, and reading styles might not be sufficient arguments in support of print – expensive as it is to produce and distribute – were it not for the relationship these qualities have with writers’ careers and writers’ impact on the business model of print journals. Literary journals and funding policy must, increasingly, take writers’ preferences into account when understanding the value of different media. While in 1995, Hergenhan and Duwell, editors of *Australian Literary Studies*, wrote that many literary journal readers “are not writers and don’t aspire to be” (p. 21), some 20 years later, a survey undertaken by *Overland* discovered that 80 per cent of readers identified as writers (personal communication, as cited in Smith, 2017, pp. 89–90). Since the 1990s, an increasing multitude of writers emerging from creative writing programs, courses, and writers’ centres and groups have aspired to publish in literary journals, prompting literary journal editors to pivot to cater more to writers’ needs and desires (Smith, 2017, pp. 75–77).

Literary journal editors identify that print is highly valued by writers, many of whom also buy and read journals. Julia Flaster of *Debris* journal says, “it’s been very rewarding for us to see writers, especially emerging writers, holding a physical magazine” (personal communication, as cited in Menzies-Pike & Ryan, 2023, p. 17), and as writer and editor Bronte Coates says,

“It’s much more impressive ... to say, ‘Look, I’m published in this’, as opposed to, ‘go to this website’ ... [print] has a different sense of accomplishment attached to it” (personal communication, as cited in Smith, 2017, p. 104). Editors have had to consider that print might be attractive to readers who are also submitting writers, and funders should consider the significance of a print publication to a writer’s career and confidence in their craft. “Making print” signifies genuine achievement for writers, and this achievement is wrapped up in print’s material presence. As Robyn Annear writes, “magazines are supposed to be ephemeral, but there’s a solidity and permanence about paper that, for many writers – particularly those just starting out – trumps digital publication” (Annear, 2013).

Connections

Ommundsen & Jacklin note that “writers do not work in isolation; they depend upon a complex infrastructure” – literary journals make a substantial contribution to this infrastructure through the communities they foster (2008, p. 149). Many literary journal editors identify the communities that connect and grow from their journals as some of their proudest and most impactful achievements. Williamson defines community formation in special interest magazines as a “symbiotic relationship between their [magazines’] history, the impact of new technologies on that history and the collective view of self that is engendered by the magazines” (2014, p. 125), all of which combine to make powerful contributions to the literary landscape in Australia. For former *Overland* editor Jeff Sparrow, communities are at the heart of the value and impact of literary journals’ work: “the community around the journal ... fosters an environment in which reading and writing seem to matter” (Sparrow, 2010). While these communities grow and thrive around digital-only journals, some editors suggest that print has the capacity to bind readers through both symbolic and material qualities. One editor interviewed by Carlin & Mason points out that “it was easier to bond creatively over a physical magazine than a website, and... the pleasure of having a publication to come together around as a community of writers and editors” (2017, p. 200).

In a similar way that Benedict Anderson proposes that newspapers tie readers together in imagined communities (Anderson, 2020), Piepmeier (2008) invokes the material qualities of hand-made zines to propose that their tactile, material characteristics create ‘embodied communities’, that unite readers and creators. While literary journals are not hand-made, but printed commercially, their deliberate aesthetic, often incorporating visual arts, illustration, high quality paper stock, and an intimate readership (often around 1,000 or so) share many of zines’ qualities. Indeed, Le Masurier offers the useful observation that independent magazines can be regarded as “ranging across a spectrum, where zines mark the border at one end and mainstream niche magazines mark the other” (2012, p. 385). Literary journals occupy the middle of the indie magazine spectrum, adopting aspects of both zines’ handmade aesthetic, and commercial magazines’ entrepreneurialism. Piepmeier’s study of zines proposes that by harnessing specific material qualities inherent in print, “the tangible object transforms an imagined relationship into an embodied one” (Piepmeier, 2008, p. 233). Comparing zines to online blogs, Piepmeier observes that “blogs do not connect human bodies in the same way that material artifacts do”, and that zines’ materiality “functions not simply as another

component of their meaning but also as a means of linking creator and reader” (2008, p. 229). This generates an intimate bond tied to the bodily experience of the zine itself and the pleasure of the “art process” undertaken by their creator and appreciated by their reader (2008, p. 230).

Capturing the full contribution of literary journals to Australian writing, including their vital role in events and community-building, requires an understanding of the evolving role that media play in forming communities. Like Piepmeier, literary journal editors have suggested that print may create a sense of connection. Despite being an enthusiastic advocate of digital publishing, former editor of literary journal *HEAT*, Ivor Indyk, describes how he personally communed with an embodied community through shared sensations of print –

I’ve relished the tactility both of the product and the process: the choice of paper, the poring over design alternatives, the marking up of proofs, even the packaging and the way – as the mailout to subscribers begins – the colour and the feel and the scent of the book occupy the senses. I imagine it having a similar effect, in the hands of its readers. (Indyk, 2011)

While these perspectives dominated before the COVID-19 pandemic, since then, literary journals’ community-building has undergone an interesting evolution. Before COVID-19, Edmonds’ history of Australian literary journals suggested that there is difficulty mobilising a community of readers around a digital publication due to the atomisation and geographic dispersion of readers (Edmonds, 2015, p. 238). Edmonds argues that the internet dispersed conventional literary readership to such an extent that literary journals would encounter challenges in nurturing the sense of community integral to their identity. Consequently, he suggested that the continued existence of journals could be in jeopardy. (2015, p. 238). Also before the pandemic, some editors suggested that print played a role in helping build a sense of occasion in community events, with Sam Cooney of *The Lifted Brow* saying: “people relax around it [the print edition] because they have something to grab and hold onto and talk about” (personal communication, as cited in Smith, 2017, p. 88). In the most recent, post-pandemic study of the field, however, editors spoke about the positive changes that the pandemic had wrought on their capacity to build and engage their communities in the digital sphere. As Stephen J. Williams of *Unfurl* explains –

the internet itself is a record of how the pandemic changed people's attitudes to how they could get audiences ... it was also a creative watershed because it forced artists to think, and to rethink, what they really needed to do to get their art across. (Personal communication, as cited in Menzies-Pike & Ryan, 2023, pp. 18–19)

Pre-pandemic, my PhD research demonstrated that editors found that providing potential funders with print editions was helpful in securing backing (Smith, 2017, p. 113). Print also seemed to play a role in attracting subscribers, as one literary journal editor stated: “since day one [we] always have increased our subscriber numbers month-on-month and year-on-year ... I can’t imagine that growth happening without a print magazine to revolve everything around” (personal communication, as cited in Smith, 2017, p. 88). Gemma Parker of *The Saltbush Review*, interviewed in 2023, demonstrates that since the pandemic, digital events have grown

in importance, and are no barrier to forming community and attracting backers, and even giving digital work a “concrete” presence in the world, much like print –

we only publish online which means that events really give a concrete sense of the work in the world ... And then there's just all the lovely conversations you have with people at those events, who are excited to know about the journal and excited to support the journal. Again, during the pandemic, that has been really valuable to us, having that presence. (Personal communication, as cited in Menzies-Pike & Ryan, 2023, p. 10)

Literary journals contribute to broader culture by creating communities where reading and writing matter, enriched by diverse perspectives and critical reflection. Events and community-building are an important part of journals’ achievements, though easily overlooked in metrics that focus on economic outcomes, so need to be captured and their contribution to Australian writing understood by policy and decision-makers in the field.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to examine issues of media, materiality, and funding in the literary journal field in light of the imminent establishment of Writing Australia and Australia’s new cultural policy, *Revive*. This investigation and synthesis of recent research finds that the field cannot be funded like other artforms, particularly performing arts capable of blockbuster events and clearly defined metrics such as ticket sales. In a small field that may not always produce what Hollen Singleton, editor of *Going Down Swinging*, calls ‘flashy’ outcomes, where continuing, day-to-day editing and publishing of new work, mentoring writers, and growing a community of readers are the main contributions to Australian arts, project funding is largely unsuitable. Implementing the recommendations in Menzies-Pike & Ryan’s report will support progress towards capturing the broad cultural impact of literary journals and levelling the playing field for the various types of publications active in the sphere.

While digital publishing presents immense opportunities and dominates operations within the field, there is a large amount of hidden labour and a skills gap, particularly in the collection and analysis of readership data, that could be addressed outside the usual grant funding paradigm through mentoring programs for editors, skills development seminars, as well as funding for operational support. Current funding arrangements tend to favour journals with secure support from institutions such as universities and there is a risk that the gap between large, university-supported journals, most of which also publish in print, and smaller micro-organisations subsisting on volunteer labour, the majority of which publish online, will become entrenched, to the detriment of emerging journals.

While digital publication is vital, funders should acknowledge that in a field where writers are important subscribers and readers of literary journals, print has enduring power and significance, as well as providing a reliable source of income. It is valued for its beauty, has a sense of aura, and seems to create a space for deep and engaged reading. Moreover, writers published in print find significant confidence and endorsement in that achievement.

This study emphasises that literary journals are not just publications, but communities, and the community aspect of their operations should be acknowledged and supported because they are environments that value, create, and contribute widely to Australian culture. These communities might be strengthened by the existence of a print publication, but have found considerable momentum online since the COVID-19 pandemic.

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