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What is a magazine?

Abstract:

Magazines are one of the oldest of media forms, arguably 'the most successful media format ever to have existed' (Holmes & Nice 2012: 1). But in an era of digital and convergent media, where technological platforms are multiplying, how can a magazine be defined? Teaching and researching in the space of magazines requires us to define our object of study. Producing and reading magazines involves an understanding of what the medium is, and what it is not – not a book, not a newspaper, not a constantly updated website. But it feels as if the ground is shifting beneath our feet. This paper will explore the current thinking about what magazines might be, drawing on a number of themes that emerge in the minimal scholarship available, textbooks, publishing industry websites, blogs, tweets and examples of magazines. After this discussion, a definition will be attempted that aims to not only 'hold' the magazine as it takes shape in the current climate, but might function across the long history of this most adaptable medium.

Biographical note:

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Introduction

What is a magazine? In a lively Twitter exchange in 2013 (#whatisamagazine) the question stretched the compressional skills of commentators to answer in 140 characters. Sparked by Christopher Phin's guest post on Peter Houston's Flipping Pages blog, his 17 point definition ended with the challenge: 'So what is a magazine? Fuck knows – go and make it up' (Phin 2013). The tweets are sometimes insightful but reveal the limitations of the medium. Bo Sacks, for example, tweeted: 'The basics are simple. Edited, Curated, Metered, Designed, Scheduled, Permanent, Time Stamped. The execution is difficult' (Sacks 2013). While Sacks may suggest the basics are simple, defining a magazine is far from that. The tweets often linked to blogs where wordier attempts were published. As magazine editor and blogger Chris Maillard notes, 'It's always been difficult to establish what a magazine actually is, and near-impossible to get a consensus on that' (Maillard 2013).

'What is a magazine?' is a question I have posed to students in the postgraduate course I have been teaching on magazines for the past eight years. We have fascinating discussions, but the answers lead to more questions, especially as digital transformations complicate the medium.[1] And it's a question that Tim Holmes and Liz Nice ask in their 2012 book *Magazine journalism*, 'The answers are many and varied, involve both logic and emotion, invoke both history and prediction, and leave us just as uncertain after we have heard them as we were before we raised this query' (2012: 4). As Houston writes, 'Over the last decade magazines and magazine publishing have changed beyond recognition. No one really knows what a magazine is – or should be – anymore. What was once a simple noun has become the subject of an existential debate along the lines of "Is there a God?" or "Can violence ever be justified?"' (2013).

At its simplest we could excavate etymology, as Harper (2001) has, and trace the word magazine back to the 1580s, as a 'place for storing goods, especially military ammunition'. In Arabic *makhazin* is the plural of *makhzan* meaning 'storehouse'. The more contemporary meaning dates from the first time the word magazine was used in the title of the *Gentleman's magazine* in 1731, 'which was so called from earlier use of the word for a printed list of military stores and information, or in a figurative sense, from the publication being a "storehouse" of information' (Harper 2001).

But that is far too general. A book is a storehouse of information. So is a newspaper for that matter. The storehouse however does direct us to the miscellany – 'a form marked by variety of tone and constituent parts' (Beetham 1996: 1) – and the first magazines did indeed display miscellaneous content that distinguished them from newspapers or books (although books can be a miscellany too). Historians disagree as to which was the first magazine. Apart from Edward Cave's *Gentleman's magazine* that first used the word, some cite the German *Erbauliche monaths-unterredungen* in 1663 (Morrish 2003: 5). Others name the French *Journal des scavans* in 1665 (Davis 1988), *The English ladies mercury* in 1693 or Daniel Defoe's *Review* in 1704 (Wood 1956: 3–4). No matter which was first, even in these early decades the miscellaneous content that distinguished the 'magazine' from a newspaper or book is already not precise enough to allow miscellany to define the medium. Editors did not throw just

any content into their magazines. *The ladies mercury*, with its questions from readers and discussion of matters relating to love, was a collection of textual items that were quite different to the news and longer articles on domestic affairs and national policy of *The review*. *Journal des scavans* contained condensed versions of books, bibliographies and the obituaries of writers. *The gentleman's magazine* was initially a digest, aggregating content from other sources and after a decade began to include original material. But this miscellaneous content was carefully selected via the filtering mechanism of an editorial philosophy devised by the editor with a particular readership in mind.

Nor is typology or categorisation much help, although understanding the range of magazines helps lay the ground. If a definition is to be found, surely it will need to apply across all the types of publications that call themselves magazines. Unfortunately, the universe of magazines seems impossible to categorise in any agreed-upon manner. Marcia Prior-Miller surveyed magazine typologies used amongst communications scholars and concluded that while magazines, journals and newspaper periodicals could indeed be classified, these scholars 'differ on category criteria, on definitions for commonly used labels and on relationships between characteristics' (1995: 3). And this conclusion was drawn before the digital revolution.

Recent typologies show no consensus. Holmes and Nice simply suggest there are four main categories: consumer, B2B (business-to-business), customer and electronic (2012: Chapter 2). Jenny McKay ignores the electronic category, but adds to the first three with in-house journals, the alternative and independent press (including DIY zines, fanzines, and niche low-circulation indies), and newspaper supplements (2013: 236–41). Morrish and Bradshaw categorise magazines somewhat differently, via revenue models: reader-funded publishing (academic and scientific journals, organization magazines), advertiser-funded publishing (B2Bs and consumer titles) and publications that promote (for example, government publications, house journals, customer magazines) (2012: 6–17). The Periodical Publishers Association of the UK (PPA) refers to four types of magazines: consumer media, specialist consumer media, business media and customer media (PPA 2011a). However we categorise the universe of magazines, the range indicates their ability to speak to and for almost every conceivable general or niche interest and market. Because of this, defining a magazine via categories of subject matter or revenue models is unlikely to be helpful.

In their recent book *Locating television*, Pertierra and Turner discuss the recent emergence of the question 'what is television?' as the meaning and definition of television has been complicated by a convergent mediascape and watching television 'online' (2012: 9). They argue that it is worth stepping back from the preoccupation with the technological shifts to understand television as a social and cultural practice (10). Television is 'many different things at once … a set of changing technologies, and a global network of industries … but it is also a regime of practices – of production, of consumption, and of everyday life' (11). When attempting to answer the question 'what is a magazine?', following this broader approach encourages us to consider how magazines are produced, consumed and how they may be absorbed into the everyday life of readers, and thereby affect the wider culture. In short, the

magazine needs to be understood as more than a discrete object; it needs to be considered as a range of practices. But are ways of *understanding* magazines – as technologies, as industries, as a regime of practices – the same project as *defining* them?

While bearing this broader understanding of magazines in mind, this essay is an exploration of the key characteristics that have been claimed to define the magazine, characteristics that emerged in a literature search involving the minimal scholarship available, textbooks, publishing industry websites, blogs and tweets, and a wide range of media formats that self-identify as magazines. Teaching and researching in the space of magazines requires us to define our object of study; producing and reading magazines involves an understanding of what the media form is, and what it is not – not a book, not a newspaper, not a constantly updated website. And when our research is historical, to be able to talk about the history of this medium, it seems important to be able to conceive of magazines as a distinct media format.

Magazines and medium

The question 'what is a magazine?' may seem to have been much easier to answer when magazines were confined to the medium of print. In 1930, in his *History of American magazines,* Frank Luther Mott could say with certainty that the magazine is a 'bound pamphlet issued more or less regularly … containing a variety of reading matter and … a strong connotation of entertainment' (1930: 7). As recently as 2006, Johnson and Prijatel could confidently state in their textbook*,* 'Magazines are printed and bound publications offering in-depth coverage of stories often of a timeless nature' (2006: 14). Industry diehards such as Professor Samir Husni (Mr Magazine) insist, in full awareness of the changes that digital and mobile technology have brought to the production and consumption of magazines, that the definition remains tied to the medium of print: 'If it is not ink on paper, please try to find another name to define that new medium, because in my book if it is not printed it is not a magazine' (Husni 2010).

It is not a coincidence that the debate about what a magazine might be has gained intensity in the context of digital technologies and their disruption of what seemed to be the more defined world of the print magazine. As Holmes observes, 'The biggest problem for magazines has been that the physical expression of technology keeps changing, and each change is not only like starting all over again, it brings in its wake new challenges for modes of production, methods of distribution and means of making money' (2013: 188). And, of course, for definition. Yet the focus on technological change – although it poses a challenge to older print-bound understandings – might be somewhat of a distraction when it comes to defining the magazine.

In their discussion of the debate around 'what is television?', Pertierra and Turner argue there has been 'a nagging suspicion, even among those who celebrate the rising tide of convergence culture, that the specific technology used to transmit and consume video content is in some way definitive: if it isn't "on the box" how can it be television?' (2012: 9–10). The question is relevant to magazine scholarship too. If it

isn't a printed object, how can it be a magazine? The problem lies partly in conflating the familiar material object – television, magazine – with the potentially much broader meanings of 'television' and 'magazine' when they are considered as economic, industrial and cultural practices. As Morrish noted in 2012, 'To many it's no longer clear exactly what a magazine is; to others the shake-up had opened their eyes to what it always was: something that cannot be reduced to mere paper' (2012: 1). Andrew Losowsky would agree that the medium of delivery is not defining. Magazines can, he says, 'be online, downloaded, could be a poster, could be graffitied on a wall' (2009: 7).

Mute, for example, is a magazine that critically covers culture, politics and technology. Since 1994, it has taken many forms across different media. Initially the magazine was published as a broadsheet printed on the same pink newsprint as the *Financial times*. It then became a mainly black and white saddle-stitched magazine; then a colour, glossy highly graphic perfect-bound magazine; then a large almost book-like publication; and now a hybrid print and web magazine (Shaughnessy 2008: 14–15).

San Francisco-based *Pop-Up magazine* began in 2010 and is still producing sold-out 'issues'. Its website lists a staff that looks very much like a traditional magazine's masthead: editor-in-chief, creative directors, design directors, writers-at-large, photographer-at-large, associate publisher. *Pop-Up* calls itself 'a live magazine, created for a stage, a screen, and a live audience'. With no record of each 'happening', this is magazine as performance art. And yet, the shows follow the traditional format of a magazine:

> Short reviews, dispatches, and provocations anchor the front. Longer features follow in the back. Our theme is no theme. *Pop-Up Magazine* seeks to explore the varied world around us, through stories and ideas. Science, music, politics, art, business, food, literature, design, nature – all in a 100-minute show (*Pop-Up* 2013).

Magazines have an editorial philosophy

Editorial philosophy is a somewhat grand term, but it 'explains what the magazine is intended to do, what areas of interest it covers, how it will approach those interests, and the voice it will use to express itself. It is highly specific' (Johnson & Prijatel 2006: 135). The editorial philosophy, sometimes called a mission statement or theme or concept, guides the content of a magazine. But, as Balland notes, the tight concept behind a publication 'should spread its influence over every part of the creation process, from the style of commissioning to the choice of materials. If successful, the individual emotional charge of every element … will combine to create a holistic, coherent package' (2010: 11).

The editorial philosophy is intimately connected to a vision about subject matter, voice, style, readers, market niche, format and design. The philosophy behind the non-profit New York-based magazine *Cabinet*, for example, states that it:

> confounds expectations of what is typically meant by the words 'art,' 'culture,' and sometimes even 'magazine' … Cabinet is designed to encourage a new culture of

> curiosity, one that forms the basis both for an ethical engagement with the world as it is and for imagining how it might be otherwise. In an age of increasing specialization, Cabinet looks to previous traditions of the well-rounded thinker to forge a new type of magazine designed for the intellectually curious reader of the future (*Cabinet* 2008).

The editorial philosophy of the irregularly published themed issues of *PiePaper* reads like this:

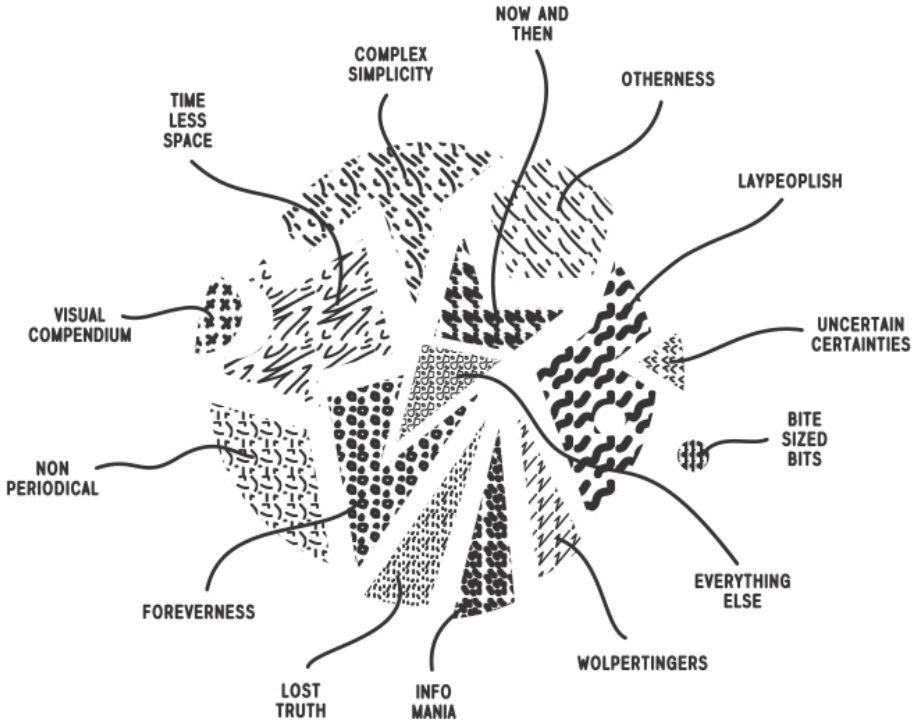

Fig. 1. *PiePaper* n/d , image reproduced with permission.

Where news values are applied to current events to filter the content selection of newspapers, magazines filter their content via an editorial philosophy. Not 'all the news that's fit to print', as *The New York times* tag line has it, but perhaps 'the news that fits'. 'News' for a magazine is new information and/or entertainment curated for its readership. The newness is not simply determined by timeliness or currency of information; new is also considered as the manner of presentation. Each element of new content is highly considered and chosen to provide a balance across the whole magazine. More content is rejected by magazine editors than included. Alan Rutter describes magazines as:

> A collection of thematically linked stories. Take stories in the loosest possible sense. Part of the beauty of magazines is their flexibility – they can encompass everything from hard news to esoteric illustration. … magazines will never be arbitrary in their presentation of content. Remember that we are telling stories … Design is the part of magazines that makes stories greater than the sum of their parts – the presentation

> matters. And it's not just about the facts you're given, it's about how it makes you feel (2013).

Design is another important point of differentiation between newspapers and magazines, and a crucial part of the vision behind the publication: 'Every periodical aims to create a visual language and attitude that are so distinctive that its readers would recognize them instantly from any random layout' (Errea 2010: 79). While newspapers are, of course, designed, they follow a much stricter and more formulaic design template. Magazines by contrast see graphic design *as* content. While mainstream printed consumer magazines may have followed a fairly predictable structure for the past 30 or so years – cover, advertising, contents page, editor's letter, contributors list, short newsy pieces followed by longer feature articles or photospreads, a scattering of advertising with cheapest ads at the back – within that structure is careful consideration of design for every element (Franchi 2010: 34). As graphic designer Ludovic Balland says, 'What a publication says is conveyed in words and images, but also in its choice of design, typography, format, and every other element of what makes the publication feel like itself, and nothing else' (2010: 11).

The Berlin magazine *mono.kultur* takes design as content utterly literally. Its editorial philosophy is simple. Each issue is devoted to one long question/answer interview with an artist from any cultural genre. Every issue has a different designer who responds to the interview content. Issue #34, for example, is the Brian Eno issue. Eno discusses the way art can affect mood. The design is thus an experiment in chromatics, with each page moving through the colours of the spectrum. This design 'not only affects the optical perception of the yellow text, but also how one responds to the content of the interview' (*mono.kultur* 2013).

Magazines have editors

Putting the editorial philosophy into practice is an act of curation by editors. 'A magazine is a curated thing', says Phin (2013), 'part of what you buy a magazine for is trusting that someone's curated or created the best stuff about the things you care about' (Phin 2013). The magazine editor makes final decisions about content – words, images and design – about the flow of the magazine and how readers will navigate their way through an issue. Journalist and digital media consultant Alan Rutter describes the magazine editor's role: 'As we curate, we create a cohesive and satisfying package … It involves ordering and adding context, assembling words and images in ways that amplify the impact of both. It means storytelling' (2013).

Of course books, newspapers and websites have editors too. But the role of magazine editor is specific: 'Their purpose is to flesh out the contours of little calculated worlds ... Magazines are generally dictatorial, not democratic: one vision propels them, one editorial policy informs them, one idea keeps them identifiable' (Rian 2002: 122). While Rian, ex-editor of *Purple* magazine, may regard the editor's role as that of a dictator, that dictatorship is constrained, not just by readers' needs and expectations but also by advertisers and the commercial imperative of most magazines. As Margaret Beetham notes, 'Editorial power is itself limited, discursively and

economically, by pressure from advertisers and from readers' (1996: 2). Morrish and Bradshaw also note the managerial and business role of the editor: 'A magazine requires an individual vision, and it needs someone who will take responsibility – the blame, when things go wrong' (2012: 5). In his analysis of the historical significance of *The gentleman's magazine* Jared Gardner isolates 'the editorial function: Cave's [pseudonymous] Sylvanus Urban emerged as the epitome of the editor, he who could organize the growing chaos of print voices and the expanding network of information and distill from it the essence of what was truly useful and entertaining' (2012: 55).

Can a magazine be produced without an editor? Recently, a few magazines have experimented with crowdsourcing an issue, sharing the editorial role of finding ideas for stories and selecting content with the readers. From 2010, for one issue a year the staff of the Finnish magazine *Olivia* have been working with readers directly, crowdsourcing the direction of content for the issue. Through a specially built online social media platform (Omaolivia), readers select images from photo shoots, suggest questions to be asked in interviews, angles for stories and headlines. Editor Marjaana Toiminen described the crowdsourcing experiment as a way that magazines could relinquish their 'brand' to the readers: 'We need to let the audience change us if we want them to pay attention' (quoted in Bartlett 2013a). The result was a boost in sales, loyalty and sense of community. *Olivia* learnt, however, that democratisation could only go so far. 'At first the team was very careful about giving enough voice to the participators, so actually they made a magazine that wasn't really *Olivia*'s concept,' said Toiminen. 'It was much looser and had less narrative and fewer good, well-written stories, because they just wanted to let out all the voices within. That was a disappointment for the crowdsourcing people and for the journalists and for me as a CEO' (quoted in Bartlett 2013b).

There is an element of reader trust in the expertise of editors (and journalists and designers) that is essential to a magazine. Phin observes, 'A magazine is something made by someone else (someone you trust). Traditionally, you buy a magazine created by a group of people who either innately have, or in whom you have imbued a sense of authority' (2013). Jeremy Leslie emphasizes this trust between magazine readers and editors too: 'You the reader are placing your trust in the editorial team to deliver a surprising combination of material, including content you perhaps didn't expect would interest you' (2009: 52).

If a reader's trust in a human editor they do not know has been one of the defining characteristics of a magazine, then the Flipboard magazine app poses a challenge. Promoted as 'the world's first social magazine', users of the app become editors themselves, selecting categories of interest that the Flipboard SEO algorithm fills from its stable of signatory publications. But Flipboard also allows users to add digital content they have found on the Web (websites and social media) to their personalised magazine, or add content found on other Flipboard magazines. The editorial content of a number of publications is disaggregated, then re-aggregated to the user's taste. The graphic design is clean, simple and magazine-like with pages that flip horizontally, and the interface allows users to share, comment and subscribe to other people's magazines (Flipboard.com 2013). Everyone, it seems, can now be an editor.[2]

Here we have arrived at one characteristic that all magazines share. Magazines are containers for content that could be about literally anything: the real world, the fictional and creative worlds. But a magazine's content needs to be filtered – edited, curated – via an editorial philosophy. The filter, the editor, no longer has to be a single person. It could be a team. It could be a computer. It could be you.

Magazine as business model?

Some definitions of a magazine stress its commercial nature, its function as a business and a way to connect advertisers to consumers. Sumner and Rhoades, for example, state: 'Here's a definition of a magazine: a regularly published periodical offering specific editorial content to a clearly defined audience with common interests *that advertisers or a sponsoring organisation want to reach*' (2006: 4, my italics). Although attracting advertisers is a critical element for the vast majority of commercial magazines, the importance of advertising revenue does not apply to all. Most DIY zines, for example, are made for barter or sharing or the pleasure of creative personal communication outside of the capitalist economy. Stephen Duncombe defines zines as 'non-commercial, non-professional, small-circulation magazines which their creators produce, publish, and distribute themselves' (1997: 6).

Nor is selling content a main motive for the more creative end of indie magazine publishing (Le Masurier 2012: 390). Although the producers are happy to sell these magazines, selling content is not the emphasis. Academic journals and the 'little magazines' are generally not funded through advertising but through reader or organisational subscriptions and sometimes through government or institutional subsidy. So, while in the main magazines are commodities produced for profit via a primarily advertiser-funded model there are enough exceptions to make their commodity status irrelevant to a general definition.

Technological change has challenged the traditional business model of magazines, where the primary revenue was based on display advertising in print. The Periodical Publishers Association (PPA) of the UK directs us to a new discourse in the industry where magazines are now thought of as 'brands' rather than discrete physical objects. The PPA website states:

> Magazine. (noun)
>
> The word 'magazine' describes branded, edited content often supported by advertising or sponsorship and delivered in print or other forms … Many magazine brands also deliver tailored information services to their audiences. Magazine brands also engage with their audiences face-to-face by organising exhibitions, conferences and other events (PPA 2011b).

Monocle was launched in 2007 intentionally *as* a global multi-media brand. Apart from the print magazine, *Monocle* content is delivered via a website (with an archive available to subscribers), audio broadcast available on the website, iTunes and syndicated to other radio stations, an online store and retail shops in major cities. As Losowsky writes, 'The future for many [magazines] seems to lie in turning their print publications into the leading, perhaps loss-leading, products in a wider portfolio that

reflects their brand values and authority across other media, be they websites, furniture, smartphone apps, or something else – thereby extending the relationship with the reader and increasing the value of the proposition' (2010: 8). However, within the brand portfolio, the magazine remains as a distinct entity. Brands might offer a way of understanding how many publishers now conceive of their magazine *business*, but it does not offer enough precision to function as a definition.

Magazines as serial

One characteristic of magazines that would seem not to be in dispute is the magazine's serial nature. For example, Leslie writes:

> a magazine is part of a series, an ongoing project that gets published under a single banner. The period between issues might be weekly, monthly, quarterly, annual or irregular, but another issue is always on its way. It is this that allows the reader to develop an ongoing relationship with a publication, and is what publishers rely on to create loyalty and continuing sales (2009: 52).

David Renard's definition of a magazine is that it 'is metered, edited and designed content that is intended to be periodically delivered to the reader in a format that is date-stamped and permanent' (2008).

The magazine scholar Susan Currie Sivek, however, disagrees that seriality needs to be part of the definition of a magazine. On her blog, she asks, 'Is there really any reason today for magazines to stick to a rigid publication schedule? Why not feed content all the time to your readers, especially in digital formats?' (2010). Currie Sivek suggests bigger stories could be posted online as well, whenever they are ready. Her reasoning is that this would increase reader engagement and provoke constant conversation. And indeed a website-only magazine *aeonmagazine.com*, launched from London in 2012, posts 'something new, completely free, every weekday'. The site specialises in long form journalism 'about nature, culture and ideas'. All articles are archived and retrievable, but a new article appears every weekday, following five categories: World Views, Nature & Cosmos, Being Human, Living Together, Altered States (*Aeon* 2013). There remains a periodicity here, albeit one story daily and skipping the weekend. (And perhaps the idea is that readers will immerse themselves in a week's worth of reading *on* the weekend.) Just as the *Guardian* magazine G2 comes out daily, and as the *Spectator* literary journal did when it first started in 1711.

But what of the magazine titles that update their digital content constantly? Australian *Cosmopolitan*, for example, requires its journalists to blog, Facebook and tweet, and to add content to the online site, as well as prepare material for monthly print editions. Constant reader contributions are also incorporated into the website. Because of digital practices such as these, Holmes and Nice conclude 'frequency can no longer be considered a reliable or unproblematic indicator' of what a magazine might be (2012: 5).

At this point – and I write this knowing the reality may change – I would argue that there remains a conceptual distinction between a finite magazine and a website. If the seriality and conceptual integrity of magazines is jettisoned entirely, will the

magazine alter in a way we have not seen before in this most protean of forms? What might be lost?

Magazines and temporality

In a conceptual sense, a magazine traditionally tells a story from beginning to end. The individual pieces of content – image, words, design – comprise smaller stories within the whole. There is a narrative integrity to the execution of the editorial philosophy for each issue. Or there should be. An unsatisfying magazine is one that leaves the reader with a sense of incompleteness. Perhaps this element explains why magazine websites may offer new and updated content, but tend not to replace the finite version be it print or app. As Robert (Bo) Sacks argues:

> I identify a magazine as a branded, identifiably and uniquely dated resource of information, preferably with a recognizable editorial voice, that has a beginning, a middle and an end. It is the brilliant linear design of the magazine that separates it from a Web site. Although a digital magazine can be three-dimensional with the readers' pursuit of tangential links and information, it is, by design, linear, finite and user-friendly (2006).

If the experience of reading a magazine has been entertaining and/or informative, depending on the purpose of the magazine, readers expect and anticipate another issue. And we are disappointed if a favourite magazine fails to deliver on that expectation, or if it ceases publication. Desire, then, may be an inherent quality in the seriality of the medium, a state that exists beyond its content but is determined by that content. As Rutter says, 'the wait is important. When things happen at regular intervals, we can anticipate and savour them … Once everything is accessible at any time … there's no anticipation' (2013). Phin makes a similar point: 'they're fundamentally finite. They can be finished. They are discrete packages of content. That's quite calming … You have never finished reading, say, the internet, which can induce a sense of ennui' (2013). In fact, it may be that the contrast between the finite temporal experience of a magazine and the ennui (or anxiety) induced by the potential infinity of constantly updated magazine websites points us to a key defining characteristic: the experience of finitude.

John Hartley has described the temporality of most magazines as mid-frequency media, as distinct from the high frequency of, say, the internet, or the low frequency of scholarship (2003: 252). Magazines are produced and consumed in this mid-frequency temporality. They are not instantaneous media; they are far more considered – slower than newspapers, faster than books. Alongside the experience of finitude in one issue, and the expectation of seriality, perhaps another defining characteristic of the magazine is the time for reflection that the slower temporality of magazine production and consumption encourages.[3] The Pew Project Centre for Excellence in Journalism's 'The state of the news media' annual report on news magazines in 2010 asked a number of industry professionals for their definition of a magazine:

> One concept seemed to connect all of their responses. A magazine is not instantaneous.

> It does not cover the news as it is breaking. It is not a destination to find out what's new. Rather, there is something in the periodicity of magazines – regardless of the platform of delivery – that involves contemplation of the news rather than coverage of it (2010).

The time that magazines allow their producers, even on a weekly basis, has led to a different type of thinking and creativity – neither instantaneous nor languorous. Rather, magazines encourage the space in-between. Navasky and Cornog suggest as much:

> Notwithstanding journals of opinion (like *The Nation* and *National Review*) or magazines of ideas (like *Harper's* and *The Atlantic*), magazines as a genre do not specialize in abstract generalities; nor, at the other extreme, do they merely present raw, undigested experience. Rather, their comparative advantage is in dealing with the in-between or netherworld – the middle region (2012: viii).

Magazines have readers

Without readers there would be no magazine, no communication, of course. But magazines – as we saw in the discussion of editorial philosophy – specifically target a niche of readers in their conception and execution, be that commercially motivated or not. This is quite a different relationship to the one newspapers have traditionally had with their readership. As Holmes and Nice argue,

> Because of the newspaper's history/legacy as a vehicle of the Fourth Estate, it has been unusual (until relatively recently) for it to base its content on a consideration of the reader's actual needs or wishes, as opposed to a paternalistic provision of what the editor or proprietor determined that readers ought to need or want (2012: 8).

This distinction is crucial. The readership of a magazine is not an amorphous 'public'. The readership of a magazine has specific interests, which the editor and staff ignore at their peril. This consideration of a niche readership leads to a more personal relationship with the reader. It explains the tone of address of most magazines too: 'a strange borderland … somewhere between conversation and writing, between private and public' (Gardner 2012: 52). Most of the available definitions of magazines emphasise this relationship with the reader. Indeed, after musing on the question 'what is a magazine?' Holmes and Nice offer a five-point General Theory of Magazines with characteristics all based around the reader:

1. magazines always target a precisely defined group of readers
2. magazines base their content on the expressed and perceived needs, desires, hopes and fears of that defined group
3. magazines develop a bond of trust with their readerships
4. magazines foster community-like interactions between themselves and their readers, and among readers
5. magazines can respond quickly and flexibly to changes in the readership and changes in the wider society (2012: 7).

For the reader, the magazine plays a distinct role in their everyday life – providing information, entertainment, pleasure, identity and community. Scholarly studies of many magazines have stressed the way this medium can create a sense of shared community or counter-publics (for example, Hermes 1993; Korinek 2000; Le Masurier 2007; Warner 2002). In her study of *McSweeney's* magazine, for example, Caroline Hamilton argues that it was 'quite consciously a very *different* literary magazine – it not only looked different and published a different kind of writing, it made its readers feel different too … *McSweeney's* was much more than just a journal – it was a way of living … ' (2010: 18–19).

On a more individual level, Phin suggests that 'A magazine is something that makes you feel cooler/smarter/more interesting. The implicit or explicit lifestyle a magazine embodies is likely as important a factor in a purchase decision as the actual information it conveys' (2013). The role that magazines play in the performance of identity has traditionally come from the recognisable physical object in a reader's hands, on their coffee table or bookshelf. But as Jon Bernstein wonders, will digital delivery change that function?

> Magazines and newspapers are (or can be) fashion accessories, status symbols, a badge of honour, membership to a club. That's certainly possible in print but it's a little trickier in the digital world where the device, not the publication, has become the symbol of status, the badge of honour. In short, nobody knows what you are reading on your iPad mini. (2013)

Or will active engagement with the magazine's online community amplify that sense of identity? Where the readership of magazines has often been referred to as a version of Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community', that community now has more of a voice and presence in the production and consumption of magazines via websites and social media. Rutter observes, 'Beyond the office walls there has always been the community itself – without which magazines, print or digital, wither and die. For the community around a magazine to exist, the sharing and discussion of the stories within it are absolutely essential' (2013). Digital channels allow this sharing and engagement more than ever before. Losowsky agrees: 'A successful print product has always been one that forged a strong connection with the reader, a connection that can now be deepened and broadened through social media groups, readers' clubs, smartphone apps, spin-off products, and TV shows' (2010: 8).

Conclusion

It would have been very satisfying to go on this journey to define a magazine and end up with a tweetable 140 characters. That, I could not manage. But based on the discussion above, the following is as close as I can come to a brief definition:

> Magazines are containers for the curated content of words, images and design, where each of these elements is as important as the other and the entire content is filtered through an editor via an editorial philosophy that speaks and responds to the specific needs of a niche readership. Magazines are serial in nature and finite in execution. Each

issue is almost always produced and consumed in a mid-temporal media space, allowing time for contemplation and desire.

The magazine has followed a richly varied trajectory since the late 17th century, with the inevitable changes to content, format and platform that come through social, cultural, industrial and technological shifts. The magazine is 'the most successful media format ever to have existed' (Holmes & Nice 2012: 1) and its longevity has been based on its adaptability. Magazines arise out of a perceived need in a particular time and place – a niche in the marketplace of informational and/or entertainment interests that is not being served, or could be served differently – by entrepreneurial publishers and editors who can translate that perceived need into an editorial philosophy that distinguishes one magazine from another, usually with an aim of financial profit. Those needs and desires are cultural, social, economic and political. Magazines that meet those needs become a means to express individuality and community, for both producers and consumers. They both reflect and shape society and culture. As Navasky and Cornog say, 'Magazines as a class, be they magazines of ideas, journals of opinion, newsweeklies, or niche publications about matters culinary, athletic, sexual, or what have you, by definition reflect the values and tensions of the culture and society they help to define' (2012: viii).

Endnotes

1. My understanding of medium (singular) and media (plural) is based on the following definition: 'Media [are] content and distribution mechanisms through which information and/or entertainment is transmitted. … Strictly speaking, the term media refers to anything through which something else can be transmitted' (Bainbridge, Goc & Tynan 2008: xvi). Magazines therefore are a medium. They also use various media through which to transmit content.
2. Similar user-as-magazine editor apps are GoogleCurrents, Zite, Pulse and Fotopedia reporter.
3. Having said this, there have been a few attempts to make 'fast' magazines, such as the experiment by *Longshot* that made a magazine in 48 hours. The theme for the magazine was announced, submissions from the 'crowd' were accepted for the next 24 hours, then the magazine was edited and designed in the following 24 hours and uploaded to MagCloud available for sale. There have been two issues so far, in 2010 and 2011. For more detail see http://longshotmag.com/ (accessed 7 October 2013).

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