

Keynote Speech

“The Future Foretold: A Special Theory of Magazines”

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2016 MtM4 Conference,
University of Sydney, Australia
12 December 2016

ABSTRACT: Reviewing the scholarship two and half decades devoted to the digital disruption of the magazine profession, the presentation examines ways in which technological change has transformed the creative editorial and design processes, the form and extent of magazine content and the industry’s underlying business models. The question of whether the evolution of delivery platforms has allowed magazines to create new and more robust relationships with their readers and an enriched sense of community is explored. A *Special Theory of Magazines* is proposed, and, based on the unique quality of reader relationships, the proposed theory argues for the continuing survival of the magazine form for the foreseeable digital future.

Thank you, Megan and Tim, for your kind invitation to address this distinguished audience, our fellow magazine scholars.

This my third MtM conference, and I have found each one more exciting and insightful than the one before. I’ve been told there will be questions and comments following my talk, so I promise not to exceed my allotted time. [It says here: Pause here for applause.]

Future historians will claim that it was the advent of the Word Wide Web in the mid-1990s that marked the true dawn of the Digital Age. This would be almost 30 years after the birth of the Internet, with the invention in the late 1960s of packet-switching networks by the U.S. Defense Department and the U.K.’s National Physical Laboratory. Certainly some historical scholars who will subscribe to this school of thought will be media historians, because the disruptions fostered by the Web have clearly had profound implications for all media—indeed, across the entire information ecosystem. And while it can be argued that the world of magazines has suffered somewhat less from the paradigm tremors than other media, for many magazine professionals that may, at best, be lukewarm comfort.

Since the mid-1990s, magazines have experimented with using the Web as a companion to the print product, as well with the various demands and opportunities offered by a range of delivery platforms: desktop, laptop, tablet, mobile, wearable, etc. In addition, new business models are being tested, of which the most important result may be the impact on both the editorial processes and product. Moreover, Web-only publications—*destination sites* or *pure play* sites in the argot of the day—have emerged that explicitly lay claim to the magazine form. With all this technological change, perhaps the most telling questions come easily to mind: What indeed lies ahead? How will digital technology shape the magazine form? Will the print medium co-exist with the digital, and if so, in what form? Or will digital replace paper as the Internet replaced telegraph wire? Or stranger still, might some further new technology emerge that would express all the advantages of digital yet somehow retain the tactile benefits of paper.

Magazine as Art Form

Before addressing those questions, however, no matter how pressing they may appear to be, there might be value in examining what is unique about the magazine form, for doing so might lead to clues about what lies over the horizon. It was Victor Navasky, long-time editor of the *Nation*, who captured one of the central truisms of the form. Magazines, he said, are “an art form, not just a delivery method.”¹ The nature of the art form can be explicated through a variety of lenses. Continuing the photographic metaphor, we can, for example, further examine magazines’ focus and depth of field. Again, it was Navasky calling on the wisdom of the seventeenth-century Englishman Francis Bacon:

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

Bacon derived his “middle axiom” perhaps 50 years before the magazine form as we know it emerge as a distinct media form. Nevertheless, it can easily be applied for comparative purposes. Magazines fall in what may be considered a *privileged position*³—more detailed and interpretive than newspapers and somewhat less reflective yet more accessible than books. As

an art form, magazines have a certain binary quality that serves to secure them a special place in their readers' lives. The combination of what Lori Cole called *ephemerality* and *periodicity*⁴ has an almost seductive effect. Given that they are experienced periodically, magazines strive to be a loyalty-producing editorial blend of the *expected*—that which is looked forward to by the readers—and the *unexpected*—the piquant surprise, perhaps even exceeding the readers' expectations. Since the structural elements of a magazine's table of contents do not change greatly from issue to issue, the editorial structure itself serves as the constant, and what fills it in each issue is the surprise.⁵

Other observers have attempted to explicate magazines' essential nature. Christopher Phin, editor of the U.K.'s *Macformat* magazine, offered an arguable yet interesting list of attributes to define the magazine form. In his view a magazine was:

- a point of coalescence for passion;
- something that makes one feel cooler/smarter/more interesting;
- a treat;
- something that informs inspires and enriches one's life;
- something made by someone else who one trusts;
- a curated thing, which is to say knowledge refined;
- a finite thing;
- something for a quiet half-hour or for the toilet;
- something one buys that might increase in value;
- has a cover;
- is regular so that one can subscribe to;
- something one can lose;
- something that is hard and expensive to produce.⁶

Responding to Phin, Alan Rutter, whose somewhat improbable title at Condé Nast International was “editorial tools subject matter expert,” added few additional attributes, suggesting that a magazine was:

- a collection of linked stories;
- designed; an experience, not a commodity;
- collaborative;

- shareable.⁷

One of the fascinating things about the magazine form is that it can be regarded from a range of perspectives, from finely granular to sweepingly societal. Considering the magazine's cultural role, Tim Holmes offered: "If culture is the stories we tell about ourselves, then magazines are prime examples of a cultural resource. They are full of stories we tell about ourselves, which we accept as being *ourselves*."⁸

In a similar but perhaps more expansive vein, it was once noted that:

The magazine form. . .has a unique and powerful role both as a product of its social and cultural moment and as a catalyst for social change. As a result, periodicals can perhaps be usefully understood to lie on a continuum of function, ranging in both intent and effect from the reflective to the transformative. It might also be suggested that magazines can serve, in both professional and scholarly research, as singularly useful markers of the sociocultural reality.⁹

In any consideration of the magazine form, it is hard to improve on the oft-quoted phrase offered by George Washington in a 1788 letter to Matthew Carey, editor of the *American Museum*. Magazines were, he wrote, "such easy vehicles of knowledge."¹⁰ It must be added, however, that Washington's letter was actually a note of condolence to Carey on the folding of this publication.

Platform Evolution

Skeptics about the future of the magazine form, particularly printed on paper, are far from elusive. Dismal predictions are the currency of the realm. "Magazines, as we know them, are dying," wrote David Renard, in a book entitled *The Last Magazine*.¹¹ Further, Nick Hampshire, in a contributed chapter in the same volume, observed: "Without a doubt, within a few decades we will look back on paper-based publications as we now look back on parchment scrolls and say 'How quaint.'"¹²

Opinions like these appeared to be most fervently held by those moved by what the historian David Nye called "the technological sublime"¹³—a sense of wonder and awe in the presence of new technologies, along with the belief that technological advances are uniformly beneficial and, more significantly, ultimately irresistible.

Clearly, the digital revolution has provided new delivery platforms such as the desktop computer, the tablet and the smart phone which many magazine publishers are learning how to

embrace. Further, most observers are quite certain that alternative means of digital delivery will continue to emerge. Which is part of the on-going problem. A study of the diffusion of digital technology within the magazine publishing industry in the early 1990s claimed that “technical horizons can draw attention away from. . .[the fact] that the existing technologies may well be intermediate systems.”¹⁴

The volatility of the technological environment presents a huge challenge for both the producer and consumer because it distorts, even violates, the implicit *magazine-reader social contract*. Addressing this issue of instability, Tim Holmes wrote: “Rather than an inability or unwillingness to keep up, the biggest problems 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.”¹⁵

With Apple’s release of its first version of the iPad in April 2010, there was a substantial body of professional opinion that expected the new device to be particularly suited to the magazine market. However, despite the commitment of substantial resources by a few prominent publishers to finding ways to display their magazines on tablets, the results were not encouraging. One of the major stumbling blocks involved the issues of *physicality* and *materiality*. Perhaps the concepts were not as well understood as they could have been. In a seminal article on the subject, Joy Enriquez wrote that:

Digital devices such as tablet computers. . .have failed to overtake the periodical’s primary medium—paper. . . .Whether it is thumbing through pages, marking the margins with handwritten notes [or] displaying a collection on a coffee table. . .this essentially means that the physical attributes of a particular medium plays a part in how humans interact with it. . . .In an information-saturated society where the economy is increasingly based on knowledge, the physicality and materiality of media cannot be ignored.¹⁶

Even worse, it was not long before an even more problematic outcome emerged. It was soon discovered that even people who owned and used tablet computers did not find them notably useful when reading magazine content. Reviewing a study, “How American Adults Consume Magazines on Tablets,”¹⁷ Deborah Corn observed: “Here’s the real news: Three-fourths of U.S. tablet users *do not* prefer digital magazines to print magazines. . . .Isn’t that a bit

like people with Blu-Ray players preferring to watch VHS tapes? . . . Despite all the hype about iPads and Kindles, U.S. magazine publishers are . . . generally wondering when their tablet investments will pay off.”¹⁸

Setting aside for the moment whether the printed magazine will survive, surely the magazine industry would be well-advised to find a fitting delivery system—one comfortably favored by its readers—in the brave new digital world. Perhaps the most promising emerging opportunity for magazines will be flexible screen technology, which promises to mimic the tactility and portability of printed paper in a booklet of electronic pages which display downloaded content. Its development funded by the U.S. Department of Defense since the mid-2000s, *digital paper* does indeed show promise. “The e-paper technologies being developed today will give us paper-thin, full-color flexible displays that will rival the print quality of paper,” wrote Nick Hampshire. “Such displays will have all the necessary electronics integrated into the display, with reader units having several pages bound together much like a current book or magazine, with the binding housing the power supply, data storage and communications circuitry.”¹⁹

What made the concept of electronic paper feasible was a technology called *electrophoretic* screens. The key to their success was the fact they consume only a fraction of the power of liquid crystal displays. Moreover, in many aspects their performance was surprisingly similar to that of the conventional printed page:

Unlike LCDs, this [electrophoretic] image does not require backlighting. Instead, the user relies on reflected light, as he would if he were reading a sheet of printed paper. Moreover. . . this means that the image remains on the screen without drawing power. A further dose of electricity is required only when the image changes; when the user “turns” to the next page, for example. Not only does this mean that electrophoretic displays are cheaper to run, a lack of constant refreshment makes them more comfortable to read—as comfortable, it is claimed, as printed paper.²⁰

It has been suggested that flexible displays may appear in the marketplace by the mid-2020s, but this prediction refers only to the screen technology. The other necessary components will no doubt require further development.”²¹

The Editorial Vineyards

Regardless of what technology prevails in the future, the advent of the digital age has, in a number of ways, transformed the nature of magazine content. On-line presentation means (a) the removal of the space limitations formerly imposed by costly printing and distribution, (b) the new display architectures required by new display formats, (c) the added value offered by the availability of hyperlinks to further information, as well as archival materials and (d) the promise of reader interactivity.²² Driven by the new technologies, the magazine industry is also undergoing transformations in the working processes through which magazines are editorially produced, altering not only required skill sets but also the working relationships within the editorial enterprise.

Perhaps the most affected of those relationships is one of the most important, the one between the creator and the consumer, the writer and the reader. The late William Zinsser, author of 18 books including the million-plus seller *On Writing Well* and one of the world's authorities on putting pen to paper, captured the thrill of the reach of the Web. Reacting, at age 88 in 2011, to a pleasure of 16,000 hits on one of his weekly on-line columns for the *American Scholar*, he wrote: "Yikes! There are real people out there. Real people reading real articles. On that day my umbilical cord to Mother Paper was snipped."²³

Not everyone, however, has been quite so sanguine. For some there was a dark side to the new digital realities of the magazine editing profession. James Truman, once called the "crown prince" of the Condé Nast magazine empire, was probably expressing the view of at least some other magazine editorial workers when he offered the following *cri de coeur*:

I also felt that in some fundamental sense that the problems magazine faced didn't and don't have editorial solutions. So in a sense I could bring my very best game, and it wouldn't make much difference to what inevitably was going to occur when this business for publishers was almost overnight unwound. . . . It is in some fundamental way over. I have an analogy. I think magazines are going to be somewhat like department stores. They'll stay in business, but you'll wonder why, since you get everything in them from other places, usually with a better customer experience.²⁴

Economic Issues

Reduced to essentials, there are two key economic questions facing the magazine industry as the digital age proceeds. They reflect the two distinct yet interrelated revenue streams—advertising and circulation—which have been the financial life's blood of the industry

for over 100 years. The first question was whether the advertising-based business model, invented in the 1890s and profitably omnipresent through the end of the twentieth century, would continue to flourish in the future. The median cost-per-thousand (CPM) for a one-time, one-page advertisement in an American consumer magazine in 2016 was approximately \$150; that is, \$150 for every thousand paid readers, i.e., those who had purchased the magazine. In comparison, the average equivalent on the Web was less than half a cent. And even if one moved beyond mere impressions to a metric that might be an indication of interest on the part of the viewer—cost-per-click—the 2015 average was only \$1.58, yielding a CPM of only \$12.²⁵

Once one did the arithmetic and saw that the average on-line advertising revenue potential was only a small fraction of that in print (roughly 1/100th), it was easy to understand why on-line advertising produced such diminished revenue.

And one integral aspect of this circumstance, the fact that in 2016 readers rarely paid for on-line content, also clearly affected the advertising revenue equation. A print magazine with its paid readership did not have to prove to advertisers that the readers were interested in the content—and therefore in the accompanying advertisements. The fact that readers cared enough to purchase the magazine amply demonstrated their interest and commitment, which was why advertisers were on average willing to pay \$150 for every thousand of them. In contrast, since on-line content was typically free to viewers, it was logical that advertisers were only willing to pay rates reduced by more than one order of magnitude.

Which leads to the second essential question: Given a possible decline in circulation revenue, would it be possible for magazines, in the face of a generalized public expectation for free on-line content, be able to erect pay-walls that will produce a revenue stream from their on-line readership? In 2016 there was not yet a definitive answer to the question. And researchers have not found any statistically significant relationship between website visits and subscriptions.”²⁶

To be sure, it was quickly apparent to everyone in the magazine industry that the Web showed great promise on the expense side of the ledger. Approximately half of all costs in print magazine publishing are accounted for in a category typically called *manufacturing and distribution*. This includes the tangible costs of buying paper, ink, printing and postage. The on-line world, however, is free of such costs. A unique economic property of digital information is

that it has a *close to zero marginal cost of reproduction*. In everyday language, we might say that digital information is not ‘used up’ when it gets used, and it is extremely cheap to make another copy of a digitized resource.²⁷

But no matter how far expenses could be reduced in the on-line business environment, the issue of revenue continued to be problematic. Not long ago the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University produced a study that included a fairly definitive explication of the business models worth examining in the search for financial support for magazine-like journalism on-line. Paraphrasing the list, the models discussed included:

- *À la carte*—stories are sold individually, readers have to pay each time; *Subscription*—readers pay monthly or annually;
- *A mix of à la carte and subscription*; (
- *Donation*—readers decide what to pay;
- *External media funding*—movie studios, in exchange for first refusal rights, to option a story as a script;
- *Sponsored content*—providers partner with companies which sponsor a certain type of content or subject matter;
- *Advertising*—using the model similar to that of conventional print publications.²⁸

Yet another on-line revenue variation was explored in the late 2000s and was still employed by *People* in 2016, the *freemium*—a combination of free and premium content, with the reader being charged for the latter.²⁹

Regardless of the model used, there was evidence that venturing on-line could produce positive revenue results. A large-scale study conducted for a consortium of prominent magazine publishers, including Condé Nast, Hearst, Meredith, News Corporation and Time, Inc. estimated that digital magazines, particularly interactive ones, could have a bright future., with potential for more than \$3 billion in revenues from interactive periodicals.

Further, the authors note that “interactive periodicals can combine the best of the print and on-line worlds. More importantly for media companies, consumers are willing to pay for the experience.”³⁰

This may have been an overly rosy projection. Or perhaps not. Indeed, much of the conversation about economic activity on-line has been so imbued with wishful thinking that it is

very hard to know. Magazine publishers with extensive experience had in 2016 not yet found a best-practices solution to the challenges of the Web.

Perhaps Tim Holmes was correct when he suggested that there was “a truth that most publishers making the transition between print and digital try to hide: Nobody knows what works.”³¹ Robert Picard, one of the founders of the field of Media Economics, was clear about the needed executive emphasis. “The most important managerial activity,” he wrote, “will be focusing on the questions of the extent and timing of [the digital] transformation that is appropriate for an existing company given its unique market conditions.”³²

Readers May Beg to Differ

Some have contended that emerging technologies have made it possible for magazines to create new and even more robust relationships with their readers. The argument centers on the claim that an enhanced interactivity via reader responses held out the promise of an enriched sense of community and a deepened bond between the publication and its readers. The hope was that the Web would make possible, in the hopeful idiom of the late-1990s, the “development, growth and maintenance of distance-transcending relationships.”³³

In the years since the beginning of the new millennium, a number of major magazine publishers attempted to take advantage of the above presumed opportunities, but the results were quite modest and difficult to confidently quantify.

Perhaps there was a fundamental misapprehension about the appetite for interactivity itself. In the rush to embrace the new, the new may have been over-valued. One of the areas in which contentious predictions recur relates to the alleged antagonism between *passive* and *interactive* media. As François Heinderyckx of the Université Libre de Bruxelles wrote “These distinctions generally take for granted that *passive* means outdated. In other words, the assumption is that legacy media are passive not by choice but because they could not, at the time they were conceived, be anything else.”

“The presumption,” Heinderyckx continued, “that the masses crave for interactivity and feel nothing but frustration while using passive media leads to a number of fundamental derived conjectures that aggravate our misrepresentation of the situation.”³⁴

Perhaps it was the *linearity* of print—and its somewhat ethereal but intuitively apparent

benefits to the reader—which was missing from most considerations. Embedded in a magazine’s editorial structure was a certain pace and flow that set tone for the reader’s experience, even when the publication was not read in lock-step from front to back. Again, Heinderyckx wrote:

The virtues of linearity are utterly and unfairly overlooked. Linear media, because they are offered at a particular moment and in a carefully prepared sequence, require some discipline and some concentration on the part of the audience. In turn, they limit distractions and encourage, or at least allow, attention, immersion even, and precious opportunities for contemplation. Linear media are also more likely to foster loyalty in an audience that enters into a pattern of regular scheduled exposure.³⁵

Furthermore, recent experiments pursuing the viability of group-sourcing an on-line magazine suggested the approach had little promise. One study found that even though readers seemed to enjoy the process of *co-creation* with the magazine editors and felt a sense of ownership of the publication, the outcome proved to be a disappointment to both the journalists and the readers. It was felt that the structural components of the editorial content were poorly integrated, and the end result seriously challenged the argument that *open journalism* can be applied to the magazine form.³⁶

In sum, if one thinks seriously about readers with an appetite for the kind of material that is to be found in the magazine form, it becomes almost self-evident that the connection between reader and the publication is a function of content rather than technology. Magazines claim a place in their readers lives because they are, in Victor Navasky’s words, an art form, not a delivery method. In the well-chosen words of Ben Smith, the unwavering editorial imperative is to present—that is, to report, to write, to edit, to design and to deliver—“stories that brilliantly answer a *latent question* and meet a curiosity readers didn’t know they had.”³⁷ Or to put a sharper point on the centrality of the editorial content, “Whether a long-form story is published in a magazine or on the web,” wrote Jonathan Mahler, its goal should be to understand and illuminate its subject, and maybe even use that subject to (subtly) explore some larger, more universal truths.”³⁸

Future Possibilities

It can easily be argued that, based on the unique relationship between the publications and their readers, the continuing survival of the magazine form in the brave new digital age is a

given. In the fragmenting media world of ever more niches, the formula underlying most magazines' success—providing content to an audience which advertisers regard as customers—appears to be viable in both the print and the digital realms. It seems unlikely that the magazine form in print will disappear.

Doomsday predictions proved unfounded. A new medium does impact the media ecosystem, sometimes significantly, but so far the successive new media have combined and recombined more than they have substituted.”³⁹

Researching the questions related to the viability of those two platforms, as well as the ways in which magazine editors can take advantage of the new technological possibilities, will be a task for magazine professionals and researchers in the coming decades. One would be well-advised, however, to approach any consideration of transformative technology with some modesty. As one observer has noted: “A central point about the Internet's future is simply to underscore something we all know—and that is that we know nothing.”⁴⁰

Four years ago Tim Holmes and Liz Nice offered their insightful *General Theory of Magazines*, which states that magazines:

- Always target a precisely defined group of readers;
- Base their content on the expressed and perceived needs, desires, hopes and fears of that defined group;
- Develop a bond of trust with their readers;
- Foster community-like interactions between themselves and their readers—and between their readers;
- Respond quickly and flexibly to changes in both their readership and society as a whole.⁴¹

To which we should append what might be called the Le Masurier Corollary, which adds the attributes of:

- Seriality;
- Finiteness;
- The notion of consumption in a “mid-temporal media space, allowing time for contemplation and desire.”⁴²

In an effort to acknowledge and perhaps foreground the economic challenges which, intensified by technological change, now face the magazine profession, there might be some value in proposing a *Special Theory of Magazines*.

Drawing on and further refining both the general theory and its corollary, the proposed special theory (*pace* A. Einstein) states: *The dominant formula for magazine success in print and/or on-line is to provide specific information of clear perceived value to a definable readership (a) willing to pay for the information and (b) on whom advertisers want to focus their market efforts.* Magazine practitioners and publishers who can meet the demands of the special theory are, I would argue, likely to not just survive but flourish.

It may serve only as oblique evidence, but even in the rarified precincts of the twenty-first century New Age digiterati—imagine, for example, the technocentric world of the TED conferences—the magazine form will still find a way to earn its keep, resonating with readers in powerful ways. Even Emily McManus, who oversaw the TED.com Web site, seemed to agree when asked recently for her underlying organizing principle “We actually try,” she said, “to be a magazine.”⁴³

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