


MAGAZINE EXCEPTIONALISM

The concept, the criteria, the challenge

Author: David Abrahamson

DOI: 10.1080/14616700701412225

Publication Frequency: 6 issues per year

Published in:  **Journalism Studies**, Volume 8, Issue 4
August 2007 , pages 667 - 670



Abstract

All journalistic media share a number of significant characteristics. Despite this verity, however, this paper puts forward an argument for a concept which might be labeled "magazine exceptionalism." Underlying the concept is the proposition that the magazine form is a genuinely different one. As a result, periodicals can be usefully understood to lie on a continuum of function, ranging in both intent and effect from the reflective to the transformative. The paper claims that magazines not only reflect or are a product of the social reality of the times, but they also serve a larger and more proactive function - that they can also be a catalyst, shaping the social reality of their sociocultural moment.

Keywords: celebrity journalism; journalistic distance; narrow-casting; social catalyst; teenage magazines

Introduction

It has long been a commonplace that all journalistic media share, to a certain extent, a number of significant characteristics. Despite this verity, however, there is perhaps an argument to be made for a concept which might be labeled "Magazine Exceptionalism." Underlying the concept is the proposition that the magazine form - unlike newspapers, broadcasting and online media - 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.

At the heart of the concept of Magazine Exceptionalism lies the notion that magazines are indeed different from other media forms. Newspapers, for example, are distinguished by the notion that they practice a quotidian, fact-driven variety of journalism and that most are explicitly geographically delimited in terms of both subject and audience. The broadcast media, despite their awesomely ubiquitous reach, are largely derivative - in the main, responding to and augmenting, rather than originating social trends.

The concept of Magazine Exceptionalism, however, suggests that, in some profound and ultimately interesting ways, the magazine form is a genuinely different one. To savor the origins of that difference, one can profitably take a journey back in time to late 17th-century London and the emergence of "periodicals of amusement" such as the *Athenian Gazette* (known later as *Athenian Mercury*) and the *London Spy*. These, along with "essay periodicals" such as Daniel DeFoe's *The Review*, Richard Steele's *The Tattler* and *The Spectator* by Steele and Joseph Addison, all published in the early 1700s,

have been credited by more than one historian with doing much to shape the matters and taste of the age.

And therein lies the essence of the central claim of Magazine Exceptionalism: that magazines not only reflect or are a product of the social reality of the times, but they also serve a larger and more pro-active function - that they can also be a catalyst, shaping the very social reality of their sociocultural moment.

If our premise is valid, the criterion of proof must include demonstrable examples. Let us begin our search for some with a few contemporary historical examples. The first concerns a case in which a specific change in a sociocultural norm occurred which can with some confidence be traced back to a single magazine's point of view. The category under consideration here is magazines for teenage girls. The first major American magazine for young women was *Seventeen*, founded in 1940. As a rule, its world view was notably chaste, very prescriptive, and unremittingly virginal. As one observer once noted, it was the perfect magazine for a mother of a teenage girl. Given its success in the marketplace, all the other teenage female magazines that came after it generally followed the same editorial model.

Then something exciting happened in the world of teenage periodicals in the late 1980s. Another magazine appeared on the scene called *Sassy*. It is no longer published, proving, one might argue, that genuine editorial originality does not guarantee long-term economic success. But while it was alive, it was really quite an unusual magazine for young women. It was first published in Australia in 1970, with the title *Dolly*, by John Fairfax Limited, a prominent Australian publishing company, which then brought it to the United States. There were a number of quite distinctive qualities to *Sassy* magazine, but certainly among the more notable was the fact that one of its core editorial tenets was founded on the premise that 14- and 15-year-old girls - proper, well-raised, wholesome, middle-class, even upper middle-class teenage girls - actually have a fairly well-developed erotic dimension (be it real or still only imagined) to their lives. And that they care about same with some intensity and therefore want to see sex and related matters candidly addressed in quite some detail in a magazine targeted at them. As you can imagine, this was a somewhat radical notion to be explicated in a popular magazine.

There were covers with cover lines on the order of "Losing Your Virginity - Read This Before You Decide" and "Sex for Absolute Beginners." It drew an immediate reaction from the American fundamentalist religious right and from groups such as the American Family Association which see it as their mission to resist the moral decay which constantly threatens American society. The economic result was boycotts of advertisers' products who did not withdraw their advertising from the magazine.

But equally interestingly, it appeared that the world of the 14-year-old American girl began to change. The effects of *Sassy's* candor can perhaps be most easily documented by examining how the other teen magazines, hoping to remain competitive, sought in response to alter their own editorial product. Since that time, despite what most observers regard as a generalized swing of the societal pendulum from liberal to conservative in much of American society, all of the teen magazines today have a much, much more realistic point of view about the private lives of the teenage girls who make up their readerships.

The second example is a macro-social societal effect. The story begins with *Esquire* magazine, and it goes back to the late 1970s. If we were transported back in time to that period, we would no doubt notice something missing, compared to today, in the daily discourse of popular culture. It would, upon examination, seem odd that there was next to nothing in the daily press about such things as television ratings, movie star salaries, celebrity author book contracts - in sum, the ongoing balance sheets of cultural production. If indeed a story did appear explicating what might be termed the economics of entertainment in the general press (as opposed to the quite thorough coverage in trade magazines such as *Variety*), it was always the exception. For instance, when the film *Cleopatra* cost a million dollars, it was a headline in *Life* magazine.

Now consider how much the business of entertainment, the economics of Hollywood and the other axes of cultural production, are part of the daily fabric of our coverage today. The question is why? If you examine the American media record very closely, tracing the phenomenon back to its origins, one discovers the work of a single editor on a single

magazine in the late 1970s. His name was Adam Moss, then in his late twenties; he went on to become the founding editor of a very well-regarded magazine called *Seven Days*, and he serves today as the editor in chief of the *New York Times* Sunday magazine.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Moss had a senior staff position on *Esquire*, and, as a matter of personal interest, wondered about such things as: Who decides what movies get made? What are the economics behind the selection of a particular actor for a particular movie role? Who decides what studios get bought and sold? How does the whole publicity machine actually work in creating and bringing the popular culture to the populace? As a result, Moss started to assign a number of staff writers and contributors to report and write a series of stories about the business of entertainment. From those published pieces and those authors, one can trace other stories appearing elsewhere in the popular press. And it is probably safe to credit Moss and what he did with *Esquire* as having a serious effect on what we all regard as the normal content of the mainstream media today, with its unremitting emphasis on not only celebrity, but also the economics of the celebrity-driven industries.

My third example is industry-wide in dimension. It speaks to both the decline of the mass-market, general-interest magazines in America in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the rise of the special-interest magazine - the narrow-casted publications. The key idea is that this transformation not only reflected changes going on in society at the time. In addition, I would also argue, the rise of the special-interest magazine at that point was actually a catalyst, furthering a process that was already taking place. Such magazines have a special role in their readers' lives, constructing a community or affinity group in which the readers feel they are members. Since many of the publications have as their central subject avocational pursuits, the magazines clearly served to encourage readers to be more active in their leisure interests. In many ways, these magazines not only are a product of the fractionalization of culture that took place at that time, but also drivers of the transformation itself.

So the obvious question arises: Why might all this have happened? Why do magazines command this privileged position? A number of inter-related reasons come to mind: the first point is that magazines enjoy a unique closeness with their audience. Consider the explanatory concept of "journalistic distance" - the ideational and figurative distance between the producer and the consumer of media form. When contemplating the typical relationship between the magazine journalist and his or her readers, and then contrasting it with a similar consideration in the newspaper world, it is quickly evident that something special is apparent. In most cases, the editors and writers of magazines share a direct community of interest with their readers. They are often, indeed literally, the same people. There is no journalistic distance.

Another point is that in many instances the editorial content of magazines is specifically designed by its editors and looked to by its readers as something that will lead to action. It is not information for information's sake. It is information that will allow the reader to do something - and, in many cases, to do something better or more enjoyably. This connection between the reader's appetite for information and interest in some resulting action may lie at the center of the impulse which brings many readers to magazines in the first place.

However, the concept of Magazine Exceptionalism and the position outlined above is not unproblematic.

The first problem to be wrestled with concerns causality. How to prove that one thing causes another? Did A cause B, or did B cause A? Or did C cause both A and B? In the examples above, magazines have taken a new and definable particular editorial approach and, before long, one can find at least suggestive evidence that in some related aspect society itself has changed. Such speculative connections are interesting, appropriate and at times even enticing. But scholarly rigor demands at least a partial admission that definitively strong causality in such matters is very difficult to prove.

The second area that might be worthy of further argument concerns the larger realm of media effects. And it is an area that is sometimes difficult to discuss without falling victim to a particular species of tautology. We speak of the effects that the media - in our case, magazines - have on society. But often the best evidence one can come up with for the effects of a

certain media are manifestations in other media. The result is a form of the circularity that is quite difficult to circumvent. Perhaps the heart of the matter is that in a media-saturated culture, it becomes ever more difficult to separate what the media is doing from what the culture is doing. In one sense, perhaps, culture itself has become defined by its media.