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The Changing Landscape of Magazine Journalism

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“I don’t believe the title ‘magazine journalist’ is even relevant in some parts of the sector now. I’m not sure ... publishers would use it to describe their content providers’ jobs now”

Lorraine Davies (2012),
Periodicals Training Council

“Information still needs to be gathered, processed, analysed, edited and presented with a spin. We still need these good old-fashioned journalism skills, so that we are doing the work for the reader.”

Miranda Eason (2012), Hearst UK

For the past 20 years there has been talk of the magazine industry being under threat, yet magazines continue to confound expectations and to survive, even thrive, in difficult times. Today however, magazines are experiencing their most testing time yet, with the industry facing massive technological change as well as a shift in how the public expects to purchase and consume editorial content.

This chapter examines the impact of these changes on the consumer magazine market. Unlike news and trade/business magazines, for which it became clear very quickly that a switch to a digital model was their only chance of survival (more on this later), consumer magazines have, arguably, been able to approach the

digital revolution in a more bespoke fashion, developing digital brands rather more cautiously alongside their print offerings, and as a result, they are still in a period of transition.

Experts believe that consumer magazines will survive, but only if their journalists can step up to the challenge of not only producing appealing and engaging print content that can compete against digital offerings, but also producing additional content for their own brand's alternative platforms – and to do so against a background of limited resource in a continuing recession.

Can the print consumer magazine survive against such pressure?

And will 'traditional' magazine journalism skills no longer be valued in the same way, if the focus is being increasingly diverted away from the print brand? In fact, will the 'magazine journalist' continue to exist at all?

This chapter seeks to clarify what the new landscape means for the magazine journalist, talking to the leaders of key consumer brands such as Heat and Woman & Home, and asking how they are meeting the current challenges. However, as Tim Holmes points out in *Magazine Journalism*, "With the picture in the magazine industry changing almost daily, it can be difficult to assess exactly how the future for magazine journalists will finally pan out".

The background

First, some context as to where the industry stands: According to Damian Butt, MD of Imagine publishing (2011):

"It's a particularly exciting time now; we are at the launch of the digital revolution. The ipad has really kick-started tablets as a viable platform. It has suddenly brought home how everything links together into an almost one stop shop for buying, storing and consuming media. It is a window to the future."

The emergence of Apple's Newstand has created a more democratic environment, allowing smaller digital publishers to access a global audience. Good content can now rise to the top, whether it is coming from an established brand or not,

meaning big brands have to work harder, to ensure that they are entertaining and informative and grabbing the reader's attention.

We have consumers with smart phones and laptops, if not yet ipads and Kindles, and all able to access more magazines in more formats than ever before. Which means journalists are under pressure to produce more varied content, as Neil Robinson, digital director of IPC, explains:

“We are asking people to commission a story, and think, ‘where is it going to be placed, and how are we going to play it out on all these different platforms?’ We are also having to say to them, ‘Don’t be afraid to do the story to a camera’ - and that is a really big leap for some of them.”

Audiences are now extremely clever at getting the different bits of information they want from different platforms and in different forms. As Sophie Wybrew-Bond, MD of Bauer's hugely successful consumer titles Heat and Empire, says:

“Audiences have almost become their own editors. They’re editing their world because their world allows them to. And we have to be the kings of edited information, if we are charging for it.”

The journalists working on B2B (business to business) magazines were among the first to face this challenge, as Robinson explains:

“Google search allowed the business reader to get the industry information they wanted without needing magazines at all. B2B magazines had to be very quick to create a fresh proposition that was seen to have value again. Simple journalism, to be honest, just didn’t cut it for readers anymore, so we started to offer relevant databases and so on. Now it’s the curation of what the journalists write about that is still very valuable to the readers.”

The death of the magazine journalist?

Lorraine Davies of the Periodicals Training Council (PTC) sees this not only impacting upon the role of the journalist, but how journalists perceive or sell themselves:

“I don’t believe the title ‘magazine journalist’ is even relevant in some parts of the sector now. I’m not sure B2B publishers would use it to describe their content providers’ jobs now.”

Davies even goes so far as to suggest that aspiring young journalists today should not refer to themselves as ‘magazine journalists’ at all - the implication being that they are restricting their opportunities by doing so. However, for those working in the consumer magazine sector today it is still very much about ‘magazines’, even if those magazines are extending their offering over a variety of platforms. In other words, there is still a need for old - fashioned magazine journalists to produce a strong consumer print brand, albeit with additional multimedia skills.

Miranda Eason, Editor of *You and Your Wedding* (which has been lauded for being a strong cross-media brand and was Hearst UK’s first consumer magazine website), is a strong believer in the importance of keeping the print content distinctly separate from online, so that the website complements the brand rather than replacing it:

“That is the biggest challenge for magazine journalists now – keeping the printed content looking fresh and relevant, when you are working on material with very long lead times. It’s also important to keep the luxury ‘treat’ feel of a magazine as that’s what separates the magazine from the website. Online can’t recreate the indulgence of a gorgeous image running across a double page spread.”

This may explain why some consumer magazines have taken a more cautious approach to going digital, as much of magazines’ continued appeal is that they offer the reader much more than the sort of information they might source online.

Wybrew-Bond agrees:

“It isn’t right to jump in with all brands. You need to think about what you’re offering. You have to look at the essence of your

brand, and think about what suits the medium.”

But whatever the brand, and whatever their job title, most ‘magazine journalists’ will now find themselves having to work across additional platforms to some degree - and often without a substantial increase in team numbers.

“I think the big challenge is working with the resource that you’ve got today,” admits IPC’s Neil Robinson:

“You know that the resource cannot get any bigger because the revenues just aren’t growing fast enough. You are having to ask people to stretch, and re-organise the way they work, so they can be as broad as possible in terms of delivery of the story to the consumer on whatever platform. Unfortunately, every new platform that comes along adds another level of work and, for the editorial staff, that’s an extra stretch.”

Maintaining quality across the board

So is the quality of magazine journalism being compromised?

‘There has been a view that we may sometimes have to adjust the bar to allow us to physically do the breadth,’ Robinson admits:

This is one of the challenges for editors and I don’t relish that thought. It is difficult to get more people on the ground to do the work, because during this transitional period, just adding another five or six members of staff means the profits go down, and that doesn’t help.

The resource issue is something that will, hopefully, ease in the future as publishers find effective ways of monetising their digital offerings and more staff are better equipped for the challenge, but journalists will still need to produce fresh material for the new platforms without taking their eye off the original print product. Indeed, the quality of the print product becomes even more important when it is in competition with online offerings.

“The over-riding objective must be to give the paying customer of the printed magazine a sense of added value to their “club membership,” says magazine publishing consultant and former editor, Peter Jackson. “And the website has to be sufficiently exciting to

persuade browsers to put down their money and join the club to discover what extra delights await them in print.”

So magazine journalists must be able to produce quality copy for two or more quite different briefs.

“Yes, journalists now have to change the way they write, depending on what they are writing for,” explains Imagine’s Damian Butt. But, he insists:

“That doesn’t mean prostituting your values at all, it just means that you are going to do the longhand, very thorough, bit for the magazine, then you are going to have to change the way you write in order to do the blog. There are people who write in a very proper way, and think you should never change that whatever you are writing for, but they are facing a very grim future because the sad fact is, if you put a well written printed article on your website, no one will ever find it - it doesn’t conform to the kind of principles that Google work by. The difference between 100 people reading it and 1000 people reading it, is all about writing in such a way that allows it to be indexed and found more readily. It is hard, but journalists have to understand that one print article might now be two Internet articles, or a news story and a top ten. The skills going forwards are about adaptability.”

The challenge of adopting new skills

Imagine, however, are producing magazines aimed mostly at a gadget/technology market, and the journalists they employ are more likely to be technically-minded and comparatively young. It is more of a challenge for brands such as IPC’s Woman & Home, which despite being one of the market leaders, with a circulation of around 300,000, is staffed by experienced magazine journalists who may be less engaged with new formats. At the moment it is rare to have a body of staff which is proficient at both working on the print version and attending to the needs of the new platforms.

“At IPC, we have a portfolio geared towards females of over 35,” says Neil Robinson:

“We have to jump into working across a variety of platforms,

which requires new multimedia skills, but we can't do it without our existing staff, because they understand the audience and understand what readers want to hear. We can't just get rid of them and bring in a whole new group of 18 year olds to do it, because they wouldn't have the sensitivity to run those brands. It is a huge challenge for everyone involved. We've got to try and help the body of existing staff to build up their confidence."

Many magazines are currently at an awkward transitional stage in this respect, but on her title, Eason sees it as more of a fusion than a divide.

"Yes, many of the younger journalists are more confident online, but it boosts their confidence to be able to pass on their web-savvy skills to the staff with less experience. It works well, because their enthusiasm encourages the existing members of the team to embrace the new technologies - more so, possibly, than if they were in a drier environment such as a training course with the IT department. And, on the flipside, experience is experience. Older journalists can pass on their 'been-there-seen-it-done-it' experience to younger staff. It can be a holistic process - it doesn't have to be us and them. It's also really important to lead by example. If the editor is a champion of online, it will filter down."

Magazine editors then will have to embrace two more new roles – championing the benefits of the web to their journalists who pre-date the internet, but also ensuring that younger journalists realise magazine content can't just be information lifted from other websites.

The skills needed for the future

"If readers can get information online, they are not going to pay for the same information regurgitated in-mag," says Eason:

"Although new media skills, adaptability and the ability to work across different platforms are obviously crucial, information still needs to be gathered, processed, analysed, edited and presented with a spin. We still need these good old-fash-

ioned journalism skills, so that we are doing the work for the reader.”

Veteran magazine journalist and editor, Peter Jackson agrees:

“Magazine journalists have to remember the basic requirement of their craft is unchanged. A journalist is someone who can identify a story, obtain that story and present it in the way that provides maximum engagement with the chosen audience. Whether that is by way of print, television, radio or online is merely a question of delivery systems. Looking forwards, my advice is that aspiring journalists should, along with learning shorthand and acquiring a driving licence, also master the basic disciplines of TV, radio and online. But above all, they should remember that journalism is the medium of words, imagination, ideas and the degree to which you can bring all that together to create a distinctive style. That will stand anyone in good stead, whatever the platform.”

So, whether or not the title ‘magazine journalist’ maintains currency remains to be seen, but, for many observers and insiders, the industry should be wary of replacing ‘journalists’ with ‘content providers’.

Challenging Questions

- Is the title ‘magazine journalist’ relevant anymore? Or should journalists now see themselves as multimedia ‘content providers’?
- Are old fashioned magazine journalism skills still relevant in a digital landscape?
- Do print magazines still have a future in a digital landscape?

Recommended reading and References

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