What is a magazine?

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Trust an academic to ask the obvious. Magazines are periodically published, professionally produced, commercially viable, primarily printed packages covering the specific interests of particular readers at an appropriate cover price, OK? Unless your interests lie on the publishing side, i.e. you reach your office via a lift labelled ‘Sales and Marketing’ rather than ‘Editorial’, in which case you may well define magazines as vehicles for delivering readers’ eyeballs to advertisers. Either way, the question answers itself in a single sentence, right?

Wrong.

Much of what we knew about magazines or thought we did, has recently come undone. While academics habitually question their ‘objects of study’, today, unusually, the questioning of magazines is not confined to the academy. All kinds of people are interrogating magazines and the magazine business, raising key questions such as: what are magazines for, and who will continue to buy them when much of what they offer can now be obtained online without payment? Besides magazine readers – or should that be ‘users’ - the queue of questioners includes almost everyone involved in the business: publishers, editors, reporters, designers, advertisers, distributors and retailers. The smartest of these know how much they don’t know; the few who aren’t worried, are the ones with most to worry about.

Facing a host of questions, the industry's answers have been mostly piecemeal, e.g. tactical use of social media in an effort to hold onto readers; or perfunctory, e.g. hoping that the end of recession will bring back business as usual. Clearly, the fundamental nature of the questions raised, is not matched by the superficial character of the answers given.

Yet for all the interrogation of magazines, inside and outside publishing, there is one question which has hardly been raised because the answer to it is taken as given: it's the technology, stupid; digital technology has been the disruptive element, obviously. But it really would be silly not to ask whether digital technology is indeed the message or only the messenger of magazines' current predicament. The fact that in some developing countries not only journalism but even print journalism is expanding *at the same time* as internet usage, should make it immediately obvious that technology *per se* is neither the problem nor the solution to the problems pressing down on magazine publishing, especially in the West.

The essential question

This brings us back to the essential question: what is a magazine? One way to address this question is to make a very brief excursion into the history of magazines – not at this stage in order to trace their historical development (this is laid out clearly in chapter 1) but rather to establish their essential character, i.e. what magazines have to be, or else, even if they remain, they will remain magazines in name only.

Founded in 1731, *The Gentleman's Magazine* was one of the earliest English publications to be referred to as a magazine, and the first to title itself as such. Just

as the magazine of a gun is the compartment where ammunition is stored, so this printed periodical was a magazine of essential information for the eighteenth century gentleman, including information on how the best people were behaving and what they were talking about. This enabled the reader to join in the conversation of polite society and affirm his status as a gentleman.

Already the essential role of the magazine is becoming apparent. The reader reads it, and is prepared to pay for the privilege, because it serves as his stepping stone into society. Without it, he risks saying the wrong thing, or, worse still, coming across as a country bumpkin who lacks conversation. Having read *The Gentleman's Magazine*, however, he will have something to say to Jane Austen's ladies, his successful appearance on the social scene being dependent on the entrée afforded not so much by aristocratic title as by this magazine title.

As an early example of modern media, **mediation** was the core business of *The Gentleman's Magazine*.

Accordingly, when the division between town and country was the burning question of the age, the editor/publisher of the *Gentleman's Magazine,* Edward Cave, took as his pseudonym the Latin tag, Sylvanus Urban. 'Urban' to indicate a man of the city, whereas 'Sylvanus', after the Roman god of fields and flocks, suggests a countryman. Thus the person behind the first magazine identified himself with a *persona* connecting town and country.

Similarly, Cave's offices in St John's Gate, Clerkenwell, frequently featured on the front page (more like a masthead than a cover photo), suggesting that the magazine itself was a gateway or mediating link between individual readers and civil society inside the gates. In both these aspects, mediation was the role that readers paid *The Gentleman's Magazine* to perform on their behalf; reading magazines came to serve as a kind of rite of passage between isolation on the one and hand and society on the other.

Mediation between private and public

The subject matter featured in Cave's *Gentleman's Magazine* was no more wide-ranging than the array of topics appearing in near-contemporary publications such as Joseph Addison's *Spectator* and Richard Steele's *Tatler*. But these periodicals were not generally referred to as magazines; conversely, the particular designation of Cave's title as a *Magazine* cannot be accounted for by the miscellaneous character of its content. The application of the term 'magazine' might have been connected to the editor/publisher's willingness to sample and re-package material published elsewhere, in the manner of a present-day DJ. On the other hand, eighteenth century usage of the term 'magazine' may itself have been somewhat miscellaneous.

In the nineteenth century, however, a clear distinction emerged between newspaper journalism published primarily in pursuit of political interests, and magazines published in response to individual concerns, especially those of a domestic nature.

Whether described as newspapers or magazines, both sets of printed matter addressed the public domain in which they themselves appeared. Moreover, their

continued appearance helped to constitute that public domain by building the necessary bridge between individual existence and social life. All publications, in other words, continued to play a mediating role between the individual and society. But the subdivision of periodicals into newspapers and magazines also initiated a division between different aspects of mediation.

If we imagine ‘private’ and ‘public’ as polarities linked by an axis comprised of different publications, then magazines have tended to cluster around the private end of this axis, whereas newspapers – though delivered to individuals at the privacy of their own breakfast table – normally concentrate on matters of public concern, primarily political in character.

In the context of nineteenth century confidence in Progress, this meant that newspapers were to inform their readership of the political world and the part they were called upon to play in society’s progressive development. In contrast, magazines mainly enabled their readers to cultivate themselves, i.e. to perform the part expected of them in the progressive development of the individual.

Alongside rest and recuperation, the Victorian home was a place for self-cultivation. All three aspects, with the emphasis on the latter, were epitomised in that manual of home improvement, *Household Words* – the mid-nineteenth century magazine edited by Charles Dickens himself. Thus in the separation of magazines from newspapers, magazines defined themselves as normally beginning (but not necessarily ending) at home.

Magazines in the modern world

If the mediating role of magazines is really essential to our existence, surely the magazine cannot simply cease to exist? That earlier bout of questioning, all those doubts we previously expressed about the future of magazines – what was all the fuss about?

The point is that both sides of the contradiction are equally true: professionally produced, commercially viable magazines, as conventionally understood, have been crucial to our existence in the modern world. On the other hand, the world we are accustomed to call modern, may now have moved on. If so, it's not given that there will be quite the same need for the magazine; or precisely the same requirement for it to play a mediating role.

Even if individual titles were often dispensable as well as disposable items, until now the existence of magazines as such has been essential. Without magazines, billions of people would never have known how to be modern. Yet today it seems that growing numbers of thoroughly modern individuals regard the magazine – not just specific issues of particular titles – as optional, contingent, inessential. It transpires that the functions which magazines have hitherto been called upon to carry out, may not be as crucial as they were before. Or, even if they are, they might no longer be the sole preserve of magazines. Hence the questioning of professionally produced magazines, and the question mark hanging over the commercial future of the magazine.

In order to understand this contradiction, let's continue to set aside both digital technology and the disruption of traditional business models on the grounds that, though important, neither of these is the independent variable or determining factor. Instead, let's look again at what we have identified as core activities of the magazine – what magazines have had to be and to do so as to remain magazines in more than name. We said that mediation has been the core business of magazines. From this it follows that the more the-people-formerly-known-as-readers can undertake mediating activity for themselves, the less they require other people, e.g. professional journalists and commercial publishers, to perform such activity on their behalf. The wholesale questioning of magazines, we suggest, is derived from this social development, rather than narrowly technical or economic issues.

Lifelong loyalty

We also said that readers traditionally looked to magazines in order to cultivate themselves; in the attempt to be a fuller, better version of the person they saw themselves becoming. In Victorian times, self-development was seen as the individual counterpart of social development enshrined in the concept of Progress. This expectation was further predicated on the idea of adulthood, which, once reached, comprised a state or way of being that lasted for life. In recent decades, however, the Victorian ideal of Progress has been widely criticised, along with the traditional idea of adulthood; and these developments have threatened the position of magazines as well as offering new business opportunities for magazine publishers.

In today's context, while there is no shortage of individuals wanting a short-term fix for their make-up or their mind-set, fewer consumers are in it for the long haul. Less likely to see their adult lives as an unfolding pattern of progressive self-cultivation, they are also less likely to take out a lifelong subscription to a suitably self-improving magazine.

This is not to say that there has been absolute decline in magazine subscriptions. What has gone into abeyance is the prospect of cultivated readers who previously *took* a particular title – *Punch,* perhaps, or the *Strand* – until they themselves were taken out in a box. Neither does the general demise of the lifelong subscriber preclude consumer loyalty to particular titles. But such loyalties tend to be comparatively short-lived: this is loyalty that cannot last any longer than the age-bracket the magazine is aimed at, if that.

Predicated on the erosion of adulthood and the corrosion of Victorian ideals, market segmentation has allowed publishers to access whole new cohorts of 'adultescent' readers. Restless consumers always questing for something different to define themselves by, have served as the launch pad for thousands of new magazine titles. Equally, readers who never grow up are not the stuff of stable markets. Thus since the 1960s the UK magazines business has expanded and destabilised at the same time.

Blurring public and private

What, then, of the magazine's further role in mediating between public and private? It turns out that the continued performance of this role depends not only on the co-

existence of public and private realms; it also depends on their separation. To be joined up by a combination of magazines and newspapers, public and private must first be sufficiently separate. Conversely, if the distinction between public and private is lost or diminished, it follows that the character of magazines will tend to become equally indistinct. Surely this is just what has happened recently. As public life has gone into sharp decline, to the point where even the national political stage has come to be seen – rightly or wrongly – as a Westminster Village some of whose residents are only out for private gain, so the distinction between newspapers and magazines has become blurred. Newspapers now resemble a succession of different daily 'magazines', while traditional magazine titles have lost much of their distinctiveness as a result.

Of course the trend for newspapers to become more like magazines might be taken to represent the supremacy of the magazine, now coming out from the shadow of its senior sibling. On the other hand, there's nothing written on the stone which says that magazine publishers will always be the best people to undertake the duties associated with magazines. Some newspapers have turned out to be unexpectedly good at being a magazine; often to the detriment of magazines themselves.

Every one a mediator?

Surely there is always mediation. As no man is an island, there must always be something which mediates between human beings, connecting them with each other, or else being human becomes impossible. Quite so. But as we have already seen with regard to the subdivision of periodicals into magazines as distinct from newspapers, the specific kind of mediation that society requires is subject to

historical development. Similarly, the way in which mediation is performed – who performs it and how – is likely to change over time.

When the authors of this textbook were trainee journalists and publishers, mediation was an almost exclusively professional activity, just as media were the sole preserve of the trained professionals we were keen to be. We came to be recognised as professionals by demonstrating superior knowledge – knowledge of our magazines' subject matter and knowledge of the media marketing and production process – far in advance of what we would expect our readers to know.

Back in the 1970s, the authors of Punk fanzine *Sideburns* were among the first to dismiss the idea of the professional musician, famously declaring: 'This is a Chord, This is Another, This is a Third – Now Form A Band'[1]. Mark Perry, editor of *Sniffin' Glue,* applied the same attitude to music journalism: 'all you kids out there who read *SG,* don't be satisfied with what we write. Go out and start your own fanzines.'[2] (Perry 1976). At the time, *Sideburns* and *Sniffin' Glue* represented only a tiny minority: their DIY ethos was discernible, but also marginal. Since the days of *Sniffin' Glue*, however, widening distrust of professionalism has been matched by the increased capacity for non-professionals to communicate with each other using digital technology. Digitisation helped to disseminate existing distrust of professional authority, catalysing its move to the foreground and cranking up the user-generator fairground. Hence the recent prospect of 'here comes everybody', in which 'everybody' – not just media professionals – is a mediator now.

Responding to such developments, many publishers have chosen to invest their remaining resources in a range of devices for creating 'community' and building seemingly egalitarian relationships with the-people-formerly-known-as-readers. Indeed this emphasis has become the hallmark of a new kind of professionalism which is pleased to avoid the allegedly authoritarian pitfalls of its predecessors. Those who refuse to compromise their authority, such as Anna Wintour at *Vogue* and successive editors of *The Economist,* are now something of a rarity. They are also some of the most successful magazine editors of the recent period. This suggests that regaining editorial authority, rather than following the fashion for renouncing the claim to superior knowledge, may be what readers really want from their magazines. At least, that's what they continue to expect from the ones for which they're actually prepared to pay.

The chapters and essays in this textbook analyse what is and is not working inside magazine publishing. In this the book is diagnostic; but it also offers a positive prognosis. *Inside Magazine Publishing* shows how magazines can renew their mediating role, not by subtracting from the authority of their content but by adding to it.

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1. *Sideburns,* December 1976, quoted in Jon Savage (2005) *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock,* London: Faber & Faber, p 281.
2. Perry, M (1976) *Sniffin' Glue* No 5, quoted in Jon Savage (2005) *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock,* London: Faber & Faber, p 279.