

MAGAZINES

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Summary

The more than 250-year-old magazine industry is robust, but in flux at the end of this millennium. The popularity of the new technologies, most especially the Internet, has brought the magazine industry to a crucial crossroads. It remains to be seen how the magazine industry changes to accommodate the world's second communication revolution. Change might take the form of paperless publications that profit from traditional advertising sources posted on Internet sites. Change might, however, mean publications based solely on subscription dollars. Perhaps the successful model for interactive magazines that make full use of the interactive nature of the Internet has yet to be invented.

For the time being, however, most magazine publishers are posting information on web pages because they recognize that an Internet presence is vital, but there has yet to be an innovator to create the model for all future online publications. Publishers are basing their actions online on the rich history of magazines in America. Publishers have learned that, in a time when newspaper readership is falling off, they can increase readership by appealing to narrow niche markets of readers with highly specialized interests.

1. Introduction

Trying to assess the condition of the magazine industry in the year 2000 is much like asking a pundit in the year 1570 to summarize the importance of the book in society. At that point, the book had been around for centuries, but the mechanical printing press was only a few years old and the revolution it generated was only beginning. The magazine industry today is at that same point. The general public has only embraced the Internet for the last few years and the revolution that it has generated is only at the beginning. Thus, it is virtually impossible to be certain where this revolution will end or how it will ultimately change the magazine industry. All we can be certain of is that magazines will certainly change. With that codicil in mind, the magazine industry is robust and growing. The Publishers Information Bureau, which tracks magazine statistics in the United States, reports that magazines had more than \$13.8 billion in advertising revenue, and \$9.9 billion in U.S. circulation revenue in 1998 - figures that support the well-being of the industry.

In fact, the United States isn't the only nation of magazine readers. While the U.S. readership figure for magazines is an impressive 83.9 percent of adults, according to World Magazine Trends 2000/2001, other countries have higher figures. Even more impressive was the Netherlands with 96.3 percent of adults reading magazines, Finland with 95 percent and France with 95.9 percent. By comparison to the 6,207 consumer titles that were published in the United States in the year 2000, Finland published 381 magazines, France 2313 consumer and business titles, and the Netherlands a mere 18. European countries benefited from cross-cultural fertilization that translated into large readership figures for international publications. Magazine publishing continues to grow ever more international, including publications with wide global circulations such as *The Economist* and the *Reader's Digest*. Magazines attract about 13 percent of the total advertising dollars worldwide, which translates into about \$38 billion annually, and that figure has been increasing in recent years.

Magazines have come a long way from a dismal assessment in the mid-1960s that the reading public could sustain only a few massive, nationally circulated, general magazines. Today, it is generally accepted wisdom that specialized publications that reach smaller, highly focused audiences can succeed. *Fly Fisherman*; *Frozen Food Age*; *Modern Baking*; *Parents*; *BlackHair*: The secret to the continued health and vibrancy of the magazine industry into the twenty-first century has been the increased reliance upon niche marketing.

In stark contrast to the generalist nature of the earliest American magazines in the eighteenth century, modern magazines succeed today by identifying small niche markets that attract both subscribers and advertisers. While the actual number of magazines being published today varies depending upon who is counting, it is a safe estimate to note that the National Directory of Magazines put the total at 18,606 for 1998. *Endless Vacation*; *Parrots Quarterly*; *Golf Digest*; *The American Hunter*; *Gourmet*: the list of niche publications today is long. That secret to success, however, was about two hundred years in coming, and required numerous detours and adjustments. And there are enough exceptions to the niche magazine concept to prove the rule.

2. Early History

We can trace the roots of magazines to the early sixteenth century when *chapbooks* circulated in western Europe. These publications were sometimes sold in bookshops but were more often available through peddlers, who were called chapmen. They included ballads, poems, excerpts of novels, journalistic accounts of murders and mayhem, and other articles of interest. These chapbooks faded away as more formalized magazines, with regular titles and publication schedules, appeared. While certainty about the earliest publications is impossible, some titles included the *Erbauliche Monats-Unterredungen* in German from 1663-1668 and the *Journal des Scavans* in French in 1665. Generally speaking, however, magazine publishing came into its own with the pioneering publications, *The Tatler* (1709-1711) and *The Spectator* (1711-1712, 1714), which were published in England by the essayists Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steele. Those publications provided the prototype upon which many other later journals were based.

Magazines in the United States have been around almost as long as newspapers - making a short-lived appearance in the 1740s and then slowly gaining readership and profits in the nineteenth century. The industry has managed to withstand intense competition from other media - namely the newsreels, radio and television - and, more recently, the Internet. But, on the edge of the new century and the new millennium, magazines are more popular than ever. They have succeeded for many reasons, not the least because they can be more in-depth than a newspaper, but not as time-consuming as a book; a newspaper lasts for a day and a television program is there for an hour, but a printed magazine will stay in a reader's home for a week or a month (or in the case of beautiful magazines like *National Geographic* or *Life*, magazines have an indefinite shelf life in basements and attics).

Magazines initially were anything but niche publications. The word "magazine" actually means storehouse and, in the beginning, magazines seemed to be storehouses for just about anything literary that didn't fit naturally into a newspaper. The American colonies were without any magazines until 1741 and then there were two published within days of each other. Perhaps there would have been sufficient curiosity and literary interest to sustain one of these new publications, but the presence of two of them insured that neither would succeed. Printer Andrew Bradford beat his rival Benjamin Franklin to press with *The American Magazine, or a Monthly View of the Political State of the British Colonies*, but only because he had gotten wind that Franklin was putting together his own magazine. Franklin's *The General Magazine, and Historical Chronicle, For All the British Plantations in America* lasted six months; Bradford's only lasted three. The price of the publications, one shilling, was a half-day's wage for most skilled workers and few among the colonists had that kind of disposable income.

The problem with the earliest magazines was that colonists had neither the leisure time nor the expendable income to afford this perceived luxury. Colonial printers, however, were not to be deterred. There was a sense among these printers that there was indeed an audience for magazines and one after another they attempted to be the first to succeed. Literacy rates, technology and circulation costs, however, conspired against them. The earliest magazines were simply printed by hand with few illustrations. They

included many articles that were reproduced from more successful British publications and a miscellaneous mish-mash of original writings. As a result, none lasted more than 18 months. Readers were forced to pay their own postage, in advance, which contributed to the small circulations. And while newspapers managed to remain profitable despite small circulations, magazines withered with circulations of just 500.

After the two earliest magazines folded, a regular parade of journals appeared in publishing centers like Boston and New York but also in towns like Danbury, Connecticut and Newark, New Jersey. Most of these were published briefly and then died quietly. Notable during the first century of magazine publishing was the establishment of the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 1812, the *North-American Review* in 1815, the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1821, and *American Banker* in 1836. Few others survived.

But, as the population in the young United States grew and as living became less of a struggle, reading increased in popularity as a leisure activity. Production difficulties eased with more sophisticated steam presses and eventually the linotype machine, while more favorable postal rates shifted the burden of mailing costs from the reader to the magazine publisher midway through the nineteenth century. All of these developments fueled a period of unfettered growth in the magazine industry and marked the beginning of specialty magazines that appealed to a specific audience. Between 1825 and 1850, up to 5,000 different magazines appeared, however briefly, in the United States. By mid-century, there were 685 periodicals being published. Researchers have pondered at what point the modern American magazine was born. Theodore Peterson, writing in 1958, suggested that there were several points late in the nineteenth century when the modern magazine as we know it was born. The date could be set at 1879 when Congress lowered mailing rates, a law that inevitably helped spawn the growth of magazines; or it could be in 1893 when several publishers slashed the costs of their magazines and appealed to an entirely new class of readers; or it could have been in 1899 when the *Saturday Evening Post*, under the editorship of George Horace Lorimer, began defining what readers really wanted.

After postal rates were slashed in 1879, the number of periodicals soared. In 1865, there were 700 periodicals in America, but by 1885, there were 3,300. And while educated readers increasingly turned to such literary lights as *Century*, *Harper's* and *Scientific American*, it wasn't until editors like Frank Munsey (*Munsey's Magazine*), S.S. McClure (*McClure's Magazine*) and John Brisben Walker (*Cosmopolitan*), dropped the cost of their magazines during the 1890s from twenty-five cents to ten cents that truly massive circulations were attained for these national magazines. What the Penny Press editors did for newspapers in the 1830s and 1840s, these populist publishers did for magazines nearly sixty years later.

Most significant among these circulation giants, according to Peterson, was the *Saturday Evening Post*, which the Curtis Publishing Co. bought for a mere one thousand dollars in 1897. Cyrus Curtis hired Lorimer, who transformed the magazine into the quintessential reading fare for middle-class America. Although it was originally conceived as a men's magazine, the editors were delighted to discover that women were

also enjoying it. By 1922, its mix of high-class fiction, profiles of business executives, essays and miscellany defined readers' tastes and swelled its circulation to 2.2 million.

The last decade of the nineteenth century served as a defining period for the development of the modern magazine. The newsstand prices of magazines were reduced so that they were no longer seen as luxury items for the richest people and, as a result, circulations soared. These huge circulations, in turn, attracted millions in advertising dollars. The final piece of the puzzle was the attempt by publishers to be more popular in tone within the editorial pages of the magazine. Historian David Abrahamson has categorized the post-World War I period of magazine growth, which continued through the 1950s, as the Golden Age of magazines. It was during this period that the broad variety of magazines emerged and publishers attempted to entice new groups of readers who had never been interested in magazines before. By 1954, however, television advertising outstripped magazine advertising for the first time and ten years later, it was twice that of magazines. Those kinds of numbers had to take a toll. At the same time, America's love affair with broad-based literary magazines went sour. In the last 100 years, readers' tastes shifted cataclysmically and many of the healthiest publications at the start of the twentieth century are long gone. Other upstarts, like *Life* and *Look*, enjoyed decades of success before bowing to new and changing magazine tastes. New categories of magazines took their place: city and regional magazines, based on *New York*, which was founded in 1967; self improvement magazines, including one called *Self*; and, as the personal computer has grown in importance, computer magazines like *PC World* and *PC Magazine*. (See *Evolution of Journalism and Mass Communications*.)

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Biographical Sketch

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