

Mapping the Magazine

Affordance, magazines as a community and lessons from the past were among topics discussed at Mapping the Magazine 5 – an international conference hosted by Columbia College in Chicago. Mary Hogarth, who also presented a paper, reports.

Mapping the Magazine is the brainchild of Tim Holmes, senior lecturer in journalism at Cardiff University. It is an inspiring international event, where industry can benefit from academic research. But how did the idea first emerge? As with many great things, the conference initially evolved out of necessity – to meet a need that wasn't being covered. Tim admits that he was “really tired of seeing ‘news’ and ‘newspapers’ privileged above magazines as a topic of research”.

“It was and remains my belief that magazines are not just a wonderful form of communication in themselves, but that they can be deep-mined for social and cultural information. This didn't seem to be happening anywhere – not in journal articles, not in books, not at conferences – so I took it on myself to be the change I wanted to see,” explained Tim.

“My colleague, Dr Donald Matheson, now at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand, secured a small grant from one of the research funding bodies; Cardiff University's School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies agreed to support it with rooms etc, and we were away.”

The first conference took place in 2005 in Cardiff and since then, four more have followed, with the latest being held at Columbia College, Chicago in July. And what a vibrant event it was, with academics and industry practitioners sharing their knowledge to offer an insight into how magazines might evolve in the future. Here's a roundup of the hottest topics discussed.

Affordance and revolutions

The keynote presentation, titled 'A Flipped Keynote', was written by Tim Holmes, but presented on the day by Sharon Bloyd-Peshkin. It examined Donald Norman's concept of 'Affordance' while also exploring Daniel Sperlings' idea of three revolutions. Framing Sperling's concept in terms of



magazines, Tim was able to define two key revolutions in magazine publishing but not the third. The first being the invention of the magazine form, citing *Gynaecium, sive theatrum mulierum* in 1586, followed by the second as the development of a traditional business model (essentially a print product, supported by revenue from copy sales and advertising).

However, he feels, the third revolution remains somewhat elusive, which is where the concept of applied affordance comes in. So, what is affordance and how might it be applied to magazines? In his book, *The Design of Everyday Things*, Donald Norman defines affordance as: ... the relationship

between a physical object and a person ... a relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent that determine how the object could possibly be used.

Applying the theoretical concept of 'affordance' to magazines, Tim explains that it is “more about what magazines allow the reader to achieve than about cost”. Therefore, he sees “magazines as offering a series of affordances in terms of utility, the high-value information they afford readers, but also taking into account the issue of identity, because a magazine addresses those specific audiences they afford”.

Such research is likely to prove invaluable when shared with publishers. However, it also opens up the possibility of investigating the issue of affordability, which Tim agreed is an interesting subject to explore further, admitting he had once paid £21 for a single copy of *Alpine Review*.

“Although a mainstream commercial magazine might have to think very carefully about whether to charge £3.50 or £3.75, indie magazines can charge £10 as a matter of course.” Today there are higher differentials in pricing than ever before.

Listening to this unique presentation, I began to see that the issue of affordance and affordability can and should be linked. Such a theory could also be shared with industry partners. Ultimately, it goes back to that old adage of providing high-value editorial, which can also relate reader identity – if a publisher achieves both of these aspects then the magazine is more likely to command a high cover price.

Serving a community

Creating community-specific magazines can result in a successful and sustainable title. Susan Currie Sivek, associate professor at Linfield College in McMinnville, Oregon (USA), explored this possibility in her presentation on the concept of 'the technology

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In addition to her academic profile, Susan is also the industry correspondent for MediaShift, which gives her a unique perspective from which to evaluate magazines and as a result, topics addressed during her talk took a somewhat theoretical viewpoint, drawing on philosophical insights from the work of Michel Foucault to inform thinking about the state of magazines today.

As part of her research, Susan included a survey from MPA: The Association of Magazine Media. Interestingly, findings revealed that readers perceive magazines to be more accurate and trustworthy in terms of content when compared to TV and web sources. As part of her research findings, Susan revealed that she thought magazines are stronger when they serve a specific community.

“They provide an invaluable source of vetted, thoughtfully presented information for people interested in a specific topic or community. When people are curious about a special interest or group, magazines are a reliable way to learn more,” she explained, adding that it is also easier for a magazine to tap into relevant advertisers and focus its energies on reaching a narrowly defined audience.

But could such a strategy be adapted by magazines in lifestyle sector? According to Susan, if a magazine focused on a specific community then yes, this strategy could work. “Perhaps the shift is to move from thinking of covering a topic to thinking of serving a group of people – that community of interest.”

In the long-term, she hopes that magazines will focus on what they do best and not simply attempt to expand in all directions, becoming too vaguely defined to be marketable and recognisable. Her talk reinforced the point that: “magazines should focus on their strengths as sources of expert knowledge and relaxing, independent repeses from scattered, distracting digital information sources.”

“These have always been appealing features of magazines,” says Susan, adding that they should emphasise their continuing strength in these areas as we move forward into a more digital media future.

Lessons from the past

As a presenter at the conference, I felt it was important to document how we can learn from the past by identifying key lessons from three successful iconic titles – *The Lady*, *Private Eye* and *Vogue*. All of which have survived for more than 50 years overcoming major challenges such as world wars, a depression and numerous economic downturns. History provides us with many useful insights if we take the time to analyse the past.

Based on the first chapter of my book, *Business Strategies for Magazine Publishing*, my paper titled, ‘Lessons from the past: what we can learn from those early pioneers’, evaluated the fundamental strengths of these quintessential publications.

From *The Lady* comes the lesson of resilience. To date, it has survived numerous financial challenges with the latest being potential bankruptcy in 2008, when it was taken over by Ben Budworth, great grandson of founder Thomas Gibson Bowles. Taking risks is a key attribute of its DNA and after a series of interventions by Budworth, *The Lady* is once again sustainable – albeit on a small circulation.

Keeping it simple is *Private Eye*’s MO. Despite the digital age, which it has yet to embrace, this notorious political satire magazine is thriving in print – recently achieving its largest ever circulation of 250,204 (July-Dec 2016). Why? Because readers love, and more importantly, trust its content.

Stable leadership, I feel, is another attribute in longevity, something which *Private Eye* and *Vogue* have in common. Both have editors who are in it for the long haul, with the former having only two editors in its 56-year history, with Ian Hislop – who took over from the founder Richard Ingrams in 1986 – still in post today. Meanwhile, *Vogue* Editor-in-Chief Alexandra Shulman was at the helm for 25 years before handing the reins over to Edward Enninful last year. I suspect Enninful too is in it for the long haul and will make a big impact on how *Vogue* content is consumed.

Going forward

To round up the conference, a lively discussion ensued on the future of magazines,

but what are the real threats to the industry? According to Tim, the biggest threat is what it always has been: “If a magazine does not publish material that readers find useful in some way, they will cease to read it.

“They also have to deliver it in a mode that the reader wants. It’s very interesting to play around with the data available from PAMCo (The Publishers Audience Measurement Company) and see who has risen to the challenge of digital publishing on the various platforms and who still appears to be wishing it would all go away. There’s no consistent strategy across the industry, which is both right as each community of readers is different and wrong (“you have to fish where the fish are,” to quote the mighty David Hepworth).”

On the issue of the survival of print magazines, Tim and I are in accord. “Print will thrive under certain conditions, digital under others,” he says. “About fifteen years ago, I predicted that print would survive at the very top and the very bottom of the market and I stand by that.”

However, from my perspective, reader consumption is a key point to consider, which is why I believe the way forward is to merge print, digital and online to create a seamless product. The ‘360-Degree Feature Package’ is a model I developed while researching *Business Strategies for Magazine Publishing*, and it featured in my talk. Instead of running articles with online additions, a feature package is created using an overall theme then takes a specific angle for each piece of content – print / digital, online and social media platforms. Such a strategy offers added value and wider coverage than the traditional feature.

A recurring theme of this conference has been that of the need to provide quality editorial that is relevant to the reader rather than a move towards promotional-based material. It seems that if publishers are to achieve sustainability, then they must take a more inclusive, reader-focused approach.

From my perspective, it’s also about keeping the business model simple and relevant, as well as providing high-quality editorial that has a real – not just a perceived – value to the reader. These are fundamental components for success and sustainability. ✦

● The next conference, *Mapping the Magazine 6*, will take place in Lisbon in 2020.

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About Mary Hogarth

Mary Hogarth is an educator, media specialist and writer. Mary led the Features Journalism programme group at Southampton Solent University and now lectures at Bournemouth University. She has published two books – *How To Launch A Magazine In This Digital Age* and *Business Strategies for Magazine Publishing* – and has a consultancy practice specialising in new title launches, editorial development, business strategies as well as audience engagement.

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