

The State of Magazine Research in 2008

Based on a report commissioned by Charles Self, president of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.

By Scott Fosdick, San José State University

Between sessions on the second day of the 2007 convention of AEJMC in Washington, D.C., I was picking the experienced brain of David Abrahamson. I was then the incoming head of the Magazine Division, and Abrahamson was a former head of the division and a font of noted research on magazines. Foremost in my mind was a 1995 book Abrahamson had edited, *The American Magazine: Research Perspectives and Prospects*. In 17 chapters contributed by leading magazine scholars, that book had detailed the accomplishments of magazine research, a bounty that Abrahamson had referred to in his introduction as “brilliant fragments.” The term suggested much about what had *not* been accomplished while acknowledging advances in the field.

In Washington a dozen years after that book’s arrival, I suggested to Abrahamson that it was time for another assessment, a progress report on where the field stood. Year after year, in research session after research session and in its scholarly publication, *The Journal of Magazine & New Media Research*, the Magazine Division had midwived hundreds of studies on a dizzying array of magazine topics. What did they all add up to?

Abrahamson responded that he had been intrigued by a similar desire voiced by Elliot King of Loyola College that the academy establish a better sense of its “core knowledge.” I asked Abrahamson if he would organize a panel of top magazine scholars to discuss just that at the next year’s convention. A few days later at a breakfast meeting of division officers, incoming president Charles Self commissioned each division to assess the state of research in its area.

Two birds were killed with one stone, then, when a year later in Chicago, Panel #249 unfolded. Moderated by Magazine Division program chair and vice head Dane Claussen of Point Park, “Core Knowledge in Magazine Research” included the following presentations:

- “Magazine Research: From Today’s Core Knowledge to Tomorrow’s” by David Abrahamson, Northwestern
- “20th-Century Magazines: Defining American Beliefs and Culture, Preserving American History” by Joe Bernt, Ohio
- “Making Scholarly Use of Magazines: What Counts Most? What Gets Left Out?” by Carolyn Kitch, Temple
- “A Grounded Framework for the Body of Magazine Research” by Marcia Prior-Miller, Iowa State
- “Researching the Business of Magazines” by David E. Sumner, Ball State

Perhaps inevitably, given the immense scope of the panel, it did not yield a cohesive narrative. Rather, the result was akin to the “brilliant fragments” of a dozen years earlier. The field emerged as still promising, still unfulfilled, but transformed in many ways both by media developments and by the work of dozens of scholars. Out of this, no narrative is possible without straining for transitions and forcing connections where there are none.

Herewith, then, are the most brilliant fragments.

From David Abrahamson

- Many scholars and commentators who worry about the myriad technological and demographic threats to journalism are in fact worried about the future of one particular media form: newspapers. Other forms, such as magazines, will do just fine.
- “Magazines remain second-class citizens in the journalism academy.” Examples abound of studies that purport to address journalism as a whole but neglect magazines entirely.
- “There is an ongoing debate about boundaries. What is a magazine?” Those who resist the digital future and cling to a definition that is limited to print are probably swimming against a very strong tide.”
- “Magazines have this special role.... They not only mirror the reality of the times, they can also be a catalyst.... As magazines move to the Web, they will have the same dual role, and we will be able to study them in the same way.”
- “Magazines are an art form, not just a delivery system. As a result, they are perfectly positioned to serve the fractionated audiences the Web makes possible.”
- “My view of the state of the scholarly study of magazines is that it’s a bit dazed and confused, but perhaps it has always been that way.”

From Joe Bernt

- “I think most of us realize that magazines are under-taught and under-researched.”
- “Magazines are extremely important to the study of American culture,” largely because of the period in which they came to the fore, 1880 to 1920. Magazines “established the modern stereotypes and frames that are still with us today,” and helped establish middle-brow culture.
- “Often it’s the short-lived magazines” that tell us the most about society. (Examples: *Film Fun*, which put funny captions on serious photos of celebrities. *Judge* magazine did parodies in the 1920s of mass circulation magazines and advertising. *Ballyhoo* magazine was the most popular in newsstand sales until Luce’s *Life*. Norman Anthony, the man behind these humor magazines, pioneered “a new, sharper humor.” He had lots of imitators.)
- “Libraries are unloading and sacrificing” the publications that are the fodder for research. There is a “culturally destructive pattern of carving up and dumping our magazines.” We should work with librarians to digitize volumes. “If we don’t do it, there’s not going to be anything to research.”

From Carolyn Kitch

- Magazine research is dominated by biographies, institutional histories, covers, and studies of women’s magazines (the latter dominated by a focus on body image). Why these topics? What’s left out?
- Common assumptions of magazine research:

- Magazines are something other than journalism—better or worse. “If they’re better than journalism, they’re art...artifacts of literary sensibilities...a realm that floats above news.” At the other end of the spectrum are studies of magazines of popular culture. “Rarely are studies of magazines considered a good fit for journals about journalism.”
- Magazines are best studied “as a window on something else...a device to better understand history itself.” Studies typically end with “and magazines were at the center of it all.” But in this research, they are just the backdrop, something that transmits something else more important. By doing this, “We diminish the special status of magazines.”
- Perhaps the most insidious assumption: “Magazines are not on the cutting edge of media developments or media scholarship” and are not relevant to the “hot topics.” But this notion is “preposterous.” In fact, magazines are ahead of the curve: subjectivity, voice, the presence of the voice of the reader, the activist role, media literacy, magazines’ early migration to the Web in the early ’90s, the cross-media ownership pioneered by Henry Luce—all these are examples of where magazines led and lead the way.

From Marcia Prior-Miller

Ongoing, current reports of infrequent publication of magazine research and limited accessibility to the body of research on magazines are grounded in 20-year-old studies: Peter Gerlach’s 1987 study of research published in *Journalism Quarterly*, and Abrahamson’s and Prior-Miller and Esch’s early 1990s analyses of magazine research indexed in *Communication Abstracts*. New data are available that suggest major changes are occurring in the status of published research on magazines.

- In sum, in 2008 the identified body of research on magazines is sizable.
- A 20-year, ongoing analysis of entries in *Communication Abstracts* has identified more than 1,500 reports of research published since 1977 that have a significant magazine component.
- The percentage of research on magazines indexed in *Communication Abstracts* as magazine research appears to have increased somewhat, though indexing of research with a magazine component continues not to be exhaustive.
- From a careful analysis of a) the research questions and b) the dependent variables in the 1,700 studies now in the database has emerged a framework of research on magazines that can be divided into 15 broad areas of research. These units can be subdivided by research questions and dependent variables into a current total of 84 subcategories across the 15 units.
- A draft outline of the units and subcategories was distributed during the presentation; current copies are available upon request. The full bibliography is currently undergoing revision for posting on Prior-Miller’s website by the end of 2008 or early in 2009.

From David E. Sumner

- Researching the business side of magazines means primarily studying circulation and revenue trends. Those trends can be studied by sector (women’s, health and fitness, shelter magazines, etc.) or by publishing companies or by individual magazines.

- Contrary to popular belief, magazine revenue, especially advertising revenue, has increased steadily during the rise of the Internet.
- Most of the largest magazine publishing companies are privately held, and data about these companies is hard to uncover. Revenue data is much easier to obtain for public companies.
- The five-year trend report of the Audit Bureau of Circulation (Schaumburg, IL) is a font of data for researchers. However, ABC-audited magazines include only about the 600 largest magazines and not the large majority of smaller magazines.
- See David Sumner's accompanying article in this issue of the journal—"Five Places to Research the Business of Magazines"—which is based on this presentation.

From a mixed conversation among members of the audience and the panel came a questions and suggestions that were, by turn, theoretical, didactic, and practical:

- "Is it necessarily a bad thing when magazine research ends up in a History Division session or a history journal? What are the implications for our field when that happens?" (Scott Fosdick, San José State)
- "Are we in a post-disciplinary age?" (David Abrahamson, Northwestern)
- "I wonder if magazines are flying under the radar any more than anyone else?" (Dane S. Claussen, Point Park)
- One's job description determines where you send your research. So, for example, someone on the advertising faculty would send an analysis of magazine ads to the advertising division and thence to ad journals. (Carolyn Kitch, Temple)

Amanda Hinnant of Missouri asked the panel, "What type of research would you like to see?"

- Sumner said the predominant form of magazine research in scholarly journals is content analyses, "How do *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News* cover x, y, or z?" This methodology, however, focuses on "pet issues" of the researcher and reveals very little about the magazines themselves.
- Bernt disagreed: "I think it's absolutely essential that we understand how this mainstream medium is covering" important issues and creating meaning.
- Kitch said, "One of my great wishes" is to see scholars "take women's magazines and other types of popular magazines more seriously, and not just as targets.... They're popular for a reason." People don't take them seriously because women aren't taken seriously.
- Claussen said he thinks much magazine research is theory poor.
- Abrahamson said that some research fails to ask: What does this research mean? What is the value of this new knowledge?

In 2008 the primary task of magazine research appears to be, much as it was 12 years ago, establishing its value—to the academy, to society, and to ourselves.