

Losing Control: Using Social Media to Engage and Connect

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Magazines are in the business of specialization. If newspapers (and TV news) trade in information about the places audiences care about, magazines emphasize how our interests can transcend place to bind us. Like all generalizations, you've surely just thought of an exception that disproves this claim (Susan Currie Sivek has one in this very issue!). The point, however, is that this overall trait of magazines is what makes them such a terrific medium for investigating the integration of social media, which by its nature links audiences through shared interests—no shared place necessary.

In 2012 I had the privilege of serving as discussant for this group of scholars as they presented what would become the special issue you're about to read. There were (and are) threads connecting their work beyond the broad mantle of "social media and magazines," and they suggest several areas for consideration: To what extent should magazines give up traditional controls (of content, of the publication schedule) in the service of engagement? How do we conceptualize that engagement? And, from the scholarly side, just how are we supposed to study what's being done?

The Control Question

Employing social media means giving up some measure of control. In his piece, Hugh Martin points this out as a risk in any magazine's online marketing efforts. Social media users do what they like, and although companies can moderate their comments and tweets, on a long enough timeline, undesirable feedback is inevitable (see the McDonald's #McDStories tag for a particularly delightful case study in mayhem). Control concerns seem to center on two areas: control of content and control of the production cycle. Content is easily the more sensitive area. In case studies of six magazine media kits, Elizabeth Hendrickson notes their use of aggrandizing self-descriptors, such as "cultural barometer" and "authoritative voice." Likewise, Susan Sivek finds city magazines using social media mainly to disseminate original content—mostly self-referential posts—rather than interact or engage. The message is clear: WE are your source. But a source of what? The traditional model would say "content," yet that focus on "Get it here and only here" may misunderstand the kind of source that social media users are seeking. Certainly a publication should provide its own content (although Huffington Post users and critics may beg to differ), but that may no longer be the sole, or even primary, purpose.

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The control of the production cycle seems to be an easier pill to swallow. Sivek finds that city magazine tweets were increasingly tied to current events (keywords such as “tonight” and “right now” were common) rather than print deadlines. When Kris Boyle and Carol Zuegner find that publication frequency is no predictor of tweet frequency, they suggest magazines are adapting to an “always-on” mentality similar to that observed by Sivek. Essentially, embracing social media translates into more opportunities to present content, which may be appealing regardless of a publication’s desire for control of that content.

Conceptualizing Engagement

“Engagement” is a common term in these four pieces, yet very different things are meant by it. Boyle and Zuegner code engagement as tweets including links to the magazine’s website or soliciting feedback from readers, but Sivek suggests city magazines that solely link back to themselves may be missing the point. There’s a discussion here: Should engagement be conceptualized as *any* kind of interactivity (e.g., providing links to click), or should it emphasize two-way conversation (e.g., replying to readers)? The willingness to engage in this second way relates back to that question of control—is an “authoritative” publication more or less willing to talk back to readers?

In her case studies, Hendrickson notes that low-circulation *Seventeen* adopts the most thorough social media strategy of the group, perhaps because it has the most to gain. Big operations like *ESPN The Magazine* and *MAXIM* may be more hesitant to tweak a formula predicated on their “authoritative voice” because letting readers talk back could dilute that authority. Further, the means of that engagement may require recognizing the differences *within* social media: Martin suggests that magazines should “multi-home” across multiple social networks, using the different strengths of each to become a multimedia platform rather than just another magazine with Facebook and Twitter accounts. The result can still be authoritative, but with regard to connecting users and ideas rather than solely supplying original content.

Developing Methods

For the researcher, these studies also provide an array of methods for getting at the question of social media use by traditional media. Martin undergoes an extensive literature review to present a list of guidelines and tactics, and Hendrickson compares the “tell” of magazines’ media kits with the “show” of their social media use across the three major platforms. The authors apply both magazine and social media standards to select their data: Sivek samples Twitter feeds from 20 City and Regional Magazine Association winners, while Boyle and Zuegner draw a stratified sample of tweets from a list of the most-followed magazines.

Notice what’s consistent here: Samples that investigate the “most,” “highest,” and “best.” In describing what’s happening with social media use, it makes sense to examine the high performers and their strategies. As the body of literature develops, however, we might also consider taking a look at the “least,” the “lowest,” and the just plain “lousy” to get a different perspective—what’s NOT working, and what does this tell us about the industry?

Rethinking Magazines as Sources

A social media strategy that fully embraces the nature of that medium may seem anathema to traditional publications. After all, we want readers to come *here*, so why shouldn't we promote ourselves? Perhaps the overarching consideration is whether readers are beginning to come to magazines for something different. Traditionally, a magazine presented itself as a place for users to go to get the information they sought; the assumption is the magazine is a source for *content*. What the introduction of social media suggests is that the magazine may become a source for *connection*, a reliable nexus of the threads of information that are now everywhere.

It's understandable that many publications still seem to prefer the one-way, low-engagement approach to social media. The fear is likely that if magazines do not keep the focus on their own work, readers will forget them and go elsewhere. What this disregards is the power of being a trusted and consistent connector and facilitator. If today's readers, as has been suggested, are seekers of sensation and novelty, no one source can hope to provide all the content they desire. What it can do is *connect* them to that content, privileging its own but more fully acknowledging the existence of a wider world.