

Book Review: The Business End of Magazines

Aileen Gallagher, Syracuse University
aegallag@syr.edu

How to Launch a Magazine in This Digital Age. Mary Hogarth (author) and John Jenkins (editor). New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. 232 pp. \$29.95 paperback.

Few students who enroll in journalism school aspire to be publishers. There's little romance in business plans and organizational charts when compared with the heady anxiety of a close or the thrill of a byline. That's one reason our industry is in hand-wringing mode: We're looking around the room, hoping that the person who knows something about journalism also knows something about business. We do our students a disservice if we hide our fiscal ignorance behind the noble Chinese wall of editorial separatism. But we need not rely on our designated university entrepreneurship guru to control the money conversation. Talk of ad sales and financial sustainability belongs in every class that attempts to launch a magazine.

For the instructors who teach those classes, Mary Hogarth's and John Jenkins's *How to Launch a Magazine in This Digital Age* provides an invaluable framework with which to discuss the business end of publishing on multiple platforms. The book speaks to future publishers, or at least editors working on lean startups, who must think not only about content but also about costs. Hogarth and Jenkins do not take a starry-eyed approach and point out more than once that 80 percent of magazines fail in the first two years. From the first chapter, "A Gap in the Market," the book suggests that what makes a magazine good is also what makes it profitable.

Each chapter provides prompts for students to consider the realities of a magazine launch. Where does your idea fit into existing titles on the newsstand? What's your unique selling point? What's your page size? Matte or glossy? Will you have an app? How will you maintain brand consistency across platforms? Where's your business plan? Lest students get discouraged, each chapter ends with an action plan to help guide the decision-making process. The authors also make good use of lists, subheads, and bullet points to simplify their presentation.

At times, *How to Launch a Magazine* feels so business-centric that the magazine's content is almost an afterthought. "Deciding an editorial focus" is about three pages out of 200. Hogarth writes that "Your title's voice" is something important to consider but doesn't give much guidance on how to develop that voice, or even how to begin thinking about it. Similarly, *How to Launch a Magazine* identifies different ways a magazine can earn revenue,

Aileen Gallagher is an assistant professor of magazine at Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. She was previously an online editor at New York magazine.

but notes that some, like advertorial, “may bring into a question a [title’s] integrity, so it is up to the editor to make sure that ethical standards are maintained.”

The text incorporates digital as well as traditional print publishing throughout, but its advice feels alternately up-to-the-minute and then dated. *How to Launch a Magazine* recognizes the importance and value of using social media platforms to extend your title’s brand and engage with your audience. But it also offers outmoded guidelines for online publishing, such as advocating “short and to the point” articles that are best suited for a world before mobile devices. When discussing apps, Hogarth and Jenkins write that tablet magazines “should mirror the print editions but include some extras.” That is just one way, but certainly not the only way.

Students and instructors alike will value the short essays called “Industry Input” that cap each chapter. Editors and publishers from both British and U.S. titles share their insights about launches, branding, and sustainable business models. Author Hogarth, a former editor of *Writer’s Forum*, the British precursor to *Writer’s Digest*, uses several examples from her own work experience. And while the book mentions mostly U.K. titles, university professors will have little difficulty subbing in more familiar references for an American classroom.

While *How to Launch a Magazine in the Digital Age* may not be required reading for every student who works on a launch, it is a valuable resource for teachers to guide conversations about a business side with which they themselves may not be too familiar. The action items and templates for things like business plans and SWOT assessments will help structure classroom discussions and lead to better magazine launch ideas and executions.