

Characteristics of Online Editors at City and Regional Magazines

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Abstract

This report offers insight into the work of online editors at city and regional magazines. A survey (N = 24) reveals that they edit mostly the same types of content for their respective online editions as the content that appears in their print editions. They also share many roles, responsibilities, and goals for the content they oversee. These online editors also experience similar pressures, such as small staffs, limited resources, and expectations to accommodate advertisers. The survey data suggest that online editors are responsible for maintaining a product that is updated far more frequently than their magazines' print editions, but they may have less experience than their print counterparts. Overall, online editors at city and regional magazines aim to create online editions that are well-designed and functional, and present dynamic, exclusive content that can attract readers. The report has practical implications for magazine professionals and publishers.

Keywords: city magazines, online editions, online editors, regional magazines

Introduction

As readers continue to seek out online magazine content, understanding the editors of such content becomes increasingly important to the magazine industry. Although previous studies have addressed newspaper online editors (Brill, 2001; Johnson & Kelly, 2003; Keith & Thornton, 2011; Singer, 1997, 2001, 2003, 2006, 2009), no studies have applied the same questioning to online magazine editors.

This report focuses on city and regional magazines, which first emerged in the late 19th century (Moon, 1970) and began to proliferate in the 1960s and 1970s (Hayes, 1981; Hynds, 1995). Published in 73 markets around the United States ("City and Regional Magazine Association," 2010), city and regional magazines offer diverse coverage, including service features and investigative reporting (Johnson & Prijatel, 2007). To determine how online editors at city and regional magazines navigate the digital landscape, this study collected information about the editors' professional practices, including their primary roles and responsibilities, goals, challenges, and sources of pride in their work, as well as information about the features of their magazines' online editions. The following literature review lays the groundwork for interpretation of the study findings.

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Literature Review

Attributes of City and Regional Magazines

Riley (1982) provided a broad characterization of city magazines, describing them as publications that devote their editorial content to coverage of a city or combination of cities. O’Grady (2004) took this description a step further, providing three defining characteristics of a city magazine: a primary, overarching focus on the city it comes from; a blend of service journalism and feature writing; and a format of enduring quality. According to O’Grady (2004), this differentiates city magazines from publications such as *The New Yorker*, which is geared to a broader audience than only readers in New York City; city guides, such as the *Where* publications, which do not dedicate significant space to feature writing; and alternative city newsweeklies, which do not serve as resources with some shelf life in the way city magazines do. In addition to these three key attributes, Hynds (1995) reported that most city magazines were privately owned, published monthly, and relied on subscriptions rather than single-copy sales. Their content focused on information about city life as well as dining, travel, and entertainment. However, most city magazine editors also highlighted community needs as an important function of their publications, and more than half of the editors reported taking a stand on local issues through appropriately labeled commentary. City magazines, however, are part of an overall genre of publications that Riley and Selnow (1991) term “regional interest magazines.” This overarching descriptor encompasses city magazines; regional magazines, which orient their coverage to a broader geographic area, such as a state, multiple states, or a region; city specialty magazines, which focus on a niche, such as gardening or women’s topics, within a geographic area; and regional specialty magazines, which offer niche content for a broader geographic area. This study focuses specifically on online editors associated with city and regional magazines.

The Impact of the Internet

Although they continue to find success in their print formats, city and regional magazines have not been immune to the influence of the Internet. Most of these publications have adopted companion websites, although digital accounted for only 5.2% and mobile/tablet for only 1.3% of the total revenues for city and regional magazines in 2012 (Mickey, 2013). But publishers cautiously recognize a long-term potential. Terry Carroll, CEO of Style Media, a regional publisher targeting three markets near Sacramento, California, says: “Anybody getting into this now has to be multi-platform. If you think you can make it on print alone, it’s tough” (Kinsman, 2011, para. 16). Henry Meininger, editor and publisher of *Berkshire HomeStyle*, focuses on print but keeps an eye on digital opportunities (Kinsman, 2011).

Although early city and regional magazine websites were largely limited to repurposing content from the print editions, many have adopted blogs, videos, and other original content providing ways for their readers to interact with the brand (Kinsman, 2007). Two-thirds of respondents in a survey of city and regional publishing companies (Mickey,

2013) reported having launched social media-based initiatives in the previous three years; digital editions, tablet applications, websites, and video also were cited as investments during that period. For the current study, the author endeavored to go beyond the surveys conducted by industry publications to discern not only the characteristics of city and regional magazines' online editions but also qualities of the editors who oversee them, an understudied population, and their perspectives of the most successful and important content on the online editions.

Changes in Editors' Roles Online

In describing the changing roles of journalists in the Internet age, studies have primarily focused on newspaper journalists. For example, Singer, Tharp, and Haruta (1999) reported many online managers earned less, worked at a lower level than their print counterparts, and reported to non-editorial supervisors, such as advertising directors or production managers. Additionally, online journalists were more likely to be recent college graduates. Brill (2001) showed that journalists working online were younger than the industry average, but in contrast to earlier studies, they reported being well-compensated.

Changing technologies also had limited effects on job duties. Metro reporters and editors interviewed during three U.S. case studies in 1995 (Singer, 1997) noted that the nature of work remained the same despite the changing method of presentation, and skills such as aggressiveness in finding information would remain important. Some highlighted the web's potential to offer an open exchange of ideas and in-depth analysis without space limitations; timeliness was seen as a benefit, but respondents emphasized that it should not overshadow accuracy. In 2000, little had changed. Online editors had many of the same goals as print journalists (Singer, 2003), and they valued the web's ability to disseminate information quickly via unlimited space. They also saw websites as extensions of print products, rather than separate entities. This attitude was seen as a barrier in a later (Consterdine, 2007) survey of staff members associated with magazine websites, who pointed to resistance from print-focused employees toward the online product, insufficient funds to devote to online development, and pressures to focus on the print product. Other challenges included finding staff members with appropriate skills for online work, learning new technologies, and seeking ways to earn revenue from the web.

To build on this literature and examine how city and regional magazines navigate their transitions to digital platforms, this survey asked online editors about their roles, goals, responsibilities, challenges, and sources of pride. The following section outlines the survey in more detail.

Method

For the purposes of this study, an "online editor" was defined as an editor who oversees the online edition (or website) of his or her respective publication. The publications were limited to members of the City and Regional Magazine Association, whose websites

were accessed to determine the name and contact information for the editorial staff person tasked with managing the publication's online edition. A list of 67 e-mail addresses of potential respondents was compiled. They received the online survey in January 2011 and could access it via a link embedded in an e-mail.

The survey instrument contained closed-ended and open-ended questions. The first set of items, partially adapted from Fullerton, Kendrick, and Frazier (2007), measured characteristics of online editors, including level of education, area of study, post-collegiate plans, and career expectations in the coming years. The second set of items identified qualities of the city and regional magazine websites, including the number of visitors they attract, the size of the online staff, how often the site is updated, and the types of content published online.

The third set of items provided a list of duties typically associated with online editors at newspapers and magazines. Using a five-point Likert scale for frequency, ranging from "Always" to "Never," the online editors identified how often they perform certain duties.

The fourth section of the survey included the job-satisfaction survey. Replicating a job-satisfaction survey used by Lund (2003), respondents answered five questions regarding their work, co-workers, supervision, pay, and promotional opportunities. They ranked their responses to each question on a scale from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree")

Following the first four sets was a section of open-ended questions, which partially replicated those of Singer (2003) and allowed respondents to elaborate on their roles and responsibilities, goals for their website, the content they see as most important and successful, and areas for improvement.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the responses, along with a qualitative analysis of the themes that emerged in the answers to the open-ended questions.

Findings

Respondent Profile

Demographic characteristics. A total of 24 online editors and other staff members responsible for overseeing city and regional magazines' online editions completed the survey, representing a 36% response rate. Fifteen of the respondents were female, two were male, and seven did not indicate a gender. They ranged in age from 23 to 59, with an average age of 31.6 (eight did not designate an age). The 16 respondents who reported their race/ethnicity were Caucasian.

Publication size. Respondents represented publications of varying sizes. Half worked for magazines with a circulation of 50,000 and under. About 28% were employed by magazines with a circulation of 100,000 and under, about 17% represented magazines with a circulation of 200,000 and under, and only 6% were from magazines with a circulation of

5,000 and under. This sample fairly accurately reflects the distribution of the print circulations of City and Regional Magazine Association member magazines (CRMA Membership Directory, 2012), most of which (63%) have a circulation of 50,000 and under, followed by the category of magazines with a circulation of 100,000 and under (26%).

Employment. The respondents had been in their current positions for 6 months to 6 years, with a median of 3 years. Their annual salaries ranged from \$19,000 to \$56,000, with an average (including bonuses) of \$34,850.

Characteristics of Online Editions

Age of online editions. Most of the surveyed editors oversaw relatively new online editions: 68.4% represented publications that had, had an online edition for five years or less, while 31.6% had, had an online edition for more than five years.

Page views. Most of the represented online editions (about 39%) received more than 100,000 page views per month. Each of the categories of 1,000 page views and under, 50,000 views and under, and 100,000 views and under represented about 17% of the participating publications. Additionally, about 11% of the participating publications fell in the category of 10,000 page views and under.

Update frequency. Most (55%) of these online editions were updated daily. Only 20% were updated multiple times per day, 15% were updated weekly, and 10% were updated monthly. The infrequency of updates often represented staff limitations. In most cases (about 84%), only three or fewer full-time staff members were dedicated strictly to these publications' online editions.

Types of content. Almost all (95%) online editors published content repurposed for the web from the traditional, print publication. More specifically, 55% of respondents published half of the content from their print publications on the online edition and 30% published all of the content. Most respondents (55%) reported that changes were made to print content that was repurposed for the online edition. All of the online editors also published online-exclusive content, with 42% publishing 30 or fewer online-exclusive articles each month.

As an addition to the repurposed print content, 85% of respondents also published articles written exclusively for the online product; 90% posted blogs; 55% included a digital edition of the print publication, either in PDF form or replicating the print edition; 85% published photo galleries; 70% featured videos; and 95% offered links to databases or directories.

Job characteristics. All respondents reported that they managed social media efforts for their publications. A majority of respondents (95%) also repurposed copy from the print edition for the online edition and copy-edited content written solely for the online edition; most (89%) also fact-checked content for their publications' online editions or devised story

ideas and assigned articles for the online edition. About 79% wrote blogs for the online edition and about 90% reported managing online reader comments and tagging articles for search-engine optimization. Further, about 89% of respondents reported archiving content from the print edition.

Duties extended beyond writing and editing. A majority of respondents assisted with web design or layout (83%); took photos for the online edition (72%); edited photos (84%); managed technical details of the online edition (95%); and tracked metrics of the online edition (90%), such as the number of online visitors and readership of certain articles. More than 40% of respondents also shot video, edited video, and helped prepare online advertising.

Perceptions of Roles, Goals, and Responsibilities

Respondents provided open-ended survey responses to the questions, “What do you see as your primary role(s) and responsibilities regarding your magazine’s online edition?” and “What are your goals for the online edition of your magazine?” Several themes emerged and are outlined below.

Site traffic. More than 73% said driving traffic to the online edition is an important goal, and noted specific means for encouraging website visits, such as e-newsletters and social media. Other respondents said the focus on boosting traffic was designed to increase revenue via online advertising or sponsorships. One editor also cited the online edition’s role in attracting a new, younger audience. Other respondents took the focus on traffic a step further by describing a desire to develop a “destination site” with a regular visitor base.

Brand awareness and cross-promotion. One respondent emphasized the magazine becoming “a part of our readers’ lives more often than once a month, to become a bigger part of the life of this city.” Another cited a focus on “building brand awareness for all of our titles and the website itself.” Three respondents also noted the importance of reflecting the print edition of the magazine in the online edition and maintaining the standards of the print publication in its online format. One respondent cited a focus on “writing substantial, creative content; fact-checking; and copy editing everything that goes online.”

Digital leadership. Other respondents listed more broad-based, strategic responsibilities, such as helping fellow staff members understand and embrace the online format, as well as developing better ways of communicating and collaborating with their co-workers. One respondent said, “My job is to lead our whole staff as we learn to distribute our content in new formats,” and another focused on “streamlining workflow for both editorial and sales departments.”

Challenges

Respondents provided open-ended responses to the questions, “What are the challenges of an online magazine edition?” and “What would you like to improve?”

Respondents listed a variety of challenges they faced in their work. Several themes emerged and are outlined as follows.

Insufficient resources. Several editors mentioned lack of resources as a problem, including staffing issues, which preclude publications from keeping up with the fast pace of the web. One editor also noted the importance of increasing the staff's technical knowledge.

Resistance. Several editors also pointed to publishers'/owners' unwillingness to fund online-exclusive content. One commented: "The web is treated almost as an afterthought." Others described problems with maintaining the dynamic between the print and online editions. One editor focused on the challenge of maintaining the same standards online as in the print edition, particularly in regard to editing and proofreading. To others, the online edition seemed likely to discourage readers from purchasing a print edition; conversely, advertisers did not yet see the value in purchasing online advertising. As one respondent said:

Information placed on the web is currently (usually) free, a tough sell when it comes to a company's sister print publications. Why spend \$4.99 at the newsstand when the information is free? Conversely, advertisers find it difficult to justify spending on web advertisements when the click-through ratio is low (and given the philosophy that the "web is free," why pay so much for a web ad?).

Some editors felt that the online edition was not valued as highly or understood as well as the print edition. One respondent said: "Sometimes you feel like the employees on the print side don't understand the value or role that an online edition should play." This editor aimed to inform co-workers that the online edition "is not just a place to post every story ever written but that the role of an online magazine site has really changed." Another respondent cited the challenge of "working with print-focused co-workers who are unwilling and/or unable to fully embrace the web" and online-exclusive content that "is often treated as second-tier, which can lead to lesser-quality content being published."

Although one editor cited increasing online advertising as an area of improvement, another editor expressed frustration with the advertisements that appear on the online edition:

Limit advertisements to a specific size and specific place on the website. Make our logo—not the banner ad—the most prominent thing on our site.... Stop creating landing pages on topics uninteresting to our readers just because we have an advertiser who is willing to place an ad there.

Points of Pride

For this section, respondents provided answers to the open-ended questions, "What content do you see as most important in your magazine's online edition?" and "What do you

consider your biggest achievement in working with the online edition?" Several answers, outlined below, emerged as points of pride.

Online-only. Overwhelmingly, online editors valued online-exclusive content as most important. Nearly 43% of online editors reported that they had increased traffic to their online editions because of the inherent advantages of the web, including: (a) enhanced coverage of local news, published in a more timely fashion than the print edition; (b) online-only articles bringing broader perspectives to content in the print magazine; (c) videos; (d) daily newsletters; and (e) social media features that helped build a community of readers.

Blogs. Forty percent of online editors said blogs were popular with readers. Blogs were valued especially for their ability to regularly attract readers to the online edition, foster a community among readers, and provide content that is timely and well-written and reported. As one editor commented:

Readers are more likely to connect with (and respond to) a controversial blog post than to a drawn-out article; the more they converse with the personality behind the opinion, the more they check in to review the ensuing dialogue, and the more likely they are to continue following the blogger.

Service items. More than 26% of online editors also cited reader-service articles, such as event and restaurant listings, city guides, and dining articles, as important content on their online editions. One editor said, "Service pieces are extremely important because it becomes evergreen content that readers access again and again."

Discussion

This report focused on the work of online editors at city and regional magazines. The results from a survey were used to outline some of the characteristics of these magazine staff members; the types of content published in their online editions; their job duties; and their primary roles, responsibilities, goals, challenges, and points of pride.

A majority (68.4%) of the publications represented in the survey had online editions for five years or less, indicating that editors may still be navigating the challenges of maintaining a new media product, yet 55% of the online editions were updated daily. Even with this consistent workload, in more than 80% of cases, three or fewer full-time staff members worked exclusively on each magazine's online edition. Overall, these editors tended to be young and underpaid, with an average age of 31.6 and an average annual salary of \$34,850.

This information suggests that online editors are responsible for maintaining a product that is updated far more frequently than their magazines' print editions, but they may have less experience (and lower salaries) than their print counterparts. This is consistent with research on online editors at newspapers (Brill, 2001; Singer et al., 1999), which

reported that online publications tended to hire new graduates and that online staffs were typically much smaller than print staffs.

In many cases, online editors were similar to print editors in the types of duties they undertook, such as repurposing copy from magazines' print editions, editing online-exclusive content, fact-checking content, devising story ideas, and assigning articles for the online edition.

Online editors also maintained reporting and writing duties for the online editions; many wrote blogs, which serve as a more consistent way for readers to interact with magazines than the print editions. These staff members took on other responsibilities as well, including web design and layout, photography, videography, and even preparing online advertising. As a result, they must possess not only traditional editorial skills, such as writing and editing, but also the abilities typically expected from designers, photographers, and advertising representatives. Even with these diverse job functions, a few editors noted the importance of maintaining the same standard of excellence in the online edition as in the print magazine, including offering articles that are well-written, well-reported, and have the potential to enlighten and engage readers. This is consistent with research relating to online editors at newspapers, who maintained similar goals as print journalists but also focused on creating complementary online material (Johnson & Kelly, 2003; Singer, 2003), as well as valued their ability to provide more in-depth coverage and opportunities for reader interaction online (Singer, 2006).

Many online editions represented in the survey were similar to earlier magazine websites, which were largely limited to repurposing content from the print editions (Kinsman, 2007). However, the survey presented here also showed that these online editions had evolved by offering online-exclusive content, such as blogs, digital editions, videos, and photo galleries.

Ultimately, online editors placed value in content published exclusively in their online editions, such as blogs, which could create a sense of community among readers and present timely information on a variety of topics. Online editors also appreciated the opportunity the web offered to provide service editorial, such as dining reviews and restaurant and entertainment listings. This is consistent with Singer's (2003) assessment of online newspaper editors, which found that they valued the web's ability to offer timely content and unlimited space to answer readers' questions in depth.

The online magazine editors surveyed for this report also faced a variety of pressures. They focused on driving traffic to their online editions and, in some cases, aimed to make their online editions "destination" websites that readers would visit frequently. With this goal also came a focus, sometimes from publishers and sometimes from the editors themselves, on earning revenue from online advertising and sponsorships. But that focus was not universally shared. Although some respondents focused on increasing traffic to their online editions, others worried that a dynamic online edition could take readers away from the print edition.

Although research suggests that online editions can serve as complementary products to print publications, this is a common concern reflected in the literature (e.g., Simon & Kadiyali, 2006). Alongside these challenges, editors also experienced technical difficulties, pressure to create fresh content, small staff sizes, and print counterparts who may not see the value in the online edition. This is consistent with the challenges facing online editors at general-interest magazines (Consterdine, 2007).

Limitations and Directions for Research

This report presents only a narrow snapshot of a convenience sample of online editors working at city and regional magazines. Future studies should explore the work of these online editors within specific theoretical frameworks, such as gatekeeping and media ethics. Such research could focus on the effects of editors' demographic qualities (age, gender, education, years of experience) on their job performance, their journalistic role conceptions, the challenges in balancing editorial- and advertising-related job duties, job changes resulting from the development of new forms of content distribution, and the potential for job burnout. Online editors at city and regional magazines that are not members of the City and Regional Magazine Association as well as online editors at other consumer magazines should also be considered for inclusion in future research.

Although city and regional magazines are just beginning to explore the potential of the web, their editors have already developed important goals and standards for online content. These editors encounter barriers, but they are also learning important skills and conducting work that is of distinct service to both their publications and readers.

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