

Opportunities and Constraints for Independent Digital Magazine Publishing

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Abstract

Optimists have long hoped that digital communication would diversify media, but the realization of this dream is far from certain today. This study investigates the emerging opportunities available to independent magazine publishers through digital publishing methods, such as distributing their magazines through the Apple Newsstand. These publishing methods have the potential to diversify magazine publishing beyond the currently dominant offerings of major multinational magazine publishers. However, at the same time, a variety of limitations—software and design expertise, public awareness and interest, and technology companies’ constraints on publishers—may have already limited the ways these independent publishers can reach audiences. Through in-depth interviews with independent digital magazine publishers, this study illuminates the effects of these factors on these publishers’ efforts to offer varied new perspectives to the public within the digital magazine medium.

Keywords: digital magazines, digital publishing, independent publishing, media diversification

Introduction

Independent print magazine publishing has seen a recent resurgence. Partly as a response to digital culture, partly as a growth of the DIY movement, and partly due to the increasing accessibility of publishing software, these celebrations of cultural themes and the print medium have become more widespread.

At the same time, however, experimentation with digital “indie” magazine publishing has also grown, with varied methods and mixed results. As will be more fully explored below, “indie” magazines are those published by individuals or small groups that are unaffiliated with a larger, established magazine publisher. A digital indie magazine can today be distributed to a worldwide audience through Apple’s Newsstand, Issuu, Amazon, Google Play, and other digital storefronts. With reach far beyond a paper magazine’s potential and

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at a fraction of the cost of printing and distribution, the independent digital magazine publisher appears to be especially empowered.

Or so it might seem. This narrative is easy to accept because it fits the myth of the Internet's promise to open up and diversify publishing. However, even in these early stages of digital magazine publishing technology, hints of the falsity of this myth are beginning to emerge. This study examines the opportunities and constraints faced by digital magazine publishers as they seek to create, distribute, and market their publications. Through in-depth interviews with independent publishers utilizing a variety of publishing platforms, this study seeks to examine how these publishers are creating their magazines and finding audiences for their work, and to identify the factors that have both aided and limited their efforts. The study adds to the body of knowledge regarding the effects of digitization on the media industries and on individuals' ability to engage in media production without the resources of a major media company.

Contemporary Magazine Publishing: The Fall of Print, the Rise of Digital

Before exploring the nature and status of independent digital magazine publishing, it is necessary to understand the current state of the mainstream magazine industry, with which independent digital magazines must compete for readers, advertisers and, yes, even digital newsstand space. The activities of these major companies have affected the course of all magazine publishing, for better or worse. Therefore, outlining their efforts at transitioning into digital media is essential to understanding the work of independent magazine publishers. We will then discuss a significant piece of research on the work of independent print magazine editors.

Concentration and decline in the mainstream print magazine industry

At present, three major publishing companies dominate the mainstream consumer magazine industry: Time Inc., Advance Publications, and Hearst Corporation. These three companies are also major media conglomerates that produce all types of media. The fourth largest magazine publisher, Meredith, makes less than a third of the revenue of Time or Advance, each of which bring in around \$3 billion per year.¹ Time's 21 American print magazines together account for 23 percent of the total spending on domestic magazine advertising.²

Despite their longevity and domination as publishing powerhouses, even these major companies have felt the impact of both the recent economic recession and the decline of audience interest in print media. The Publishers Information Bureau reported that ad pages in its tracked magazines fell by 8.2 percent between 2011 and 2012.³ Total magazine circulation has stabilized, and paid subscriptions have even increased slightly, but newsstand sales have declined dramatically over the last five years.⁴ One industry expert projects that by 2017, magazines' newsstand sales will have declined by about 68 percent in comparison to the preceding decade.⁵

Major publishers' investment in digital innovation

The great hope for these magazine companies—and for readers who still enjoy the magazine medium—is that digital innovations will help them revitalize their publications and reinvigorate their audiences, as well as reinspire advertisers to invest in magazine advertising. The major magazine companies possess the greatest resources for research and development with regard to new digital products and strategies, and are able to gamble on these innovations in ways that smaller companies cannot. For example, *Wired* magazine (owned by Condé Nast, a subsidiary of Advance) released a demo of its magazine app for the iPad to much fanfare in 2010, and has published digital and print editions since then. The development of the app—one of the first notable magazine releases for the iPad—required a significant investment of time and money from Condé Nast, and involved a yearlong effort from a large art and design team at *Wired*.⁶

Smaller publishers generally cannot afford to put these kinds of resources toward digital innovation, and have looked toward major publishers to develop software tools and business strategies to support these new products. Smaller publishers may, as a result, adopt big publishers' successful approaches for themselves. For instance, the *Wired* team used the Adobe Digital Publishing Suite (DPS) software in its early iterations, and *Wired's* experiences no doubt helped refine the DPS for later users. Similarly, the Bonnier Group spun off its own digital publishing platform, Mag+, as a separate entity following the implementation of Mag+ at its own magazines in order to profit not only from its own but also from other publishers' digital efforts.⁷ A wide variety of magazines have since adopted Mag+ as their own publishing platform.⁸

Adobe DPS, Mag+, Zinio (a digital replica distributor), The Periodical Co. (a minimalist magazine platform), and other publishing methods each reflect a unique approach to digital publishing. Publishers big and small can select the platform that best fits their content, business model, and audiences. However, even exploring these different options takes time and technological expertise that may not be available to a prospective small or independent publisher who lacks the resources of the major magazine companies. While software tools may have been democratized somewhat since the pioneering work of early adopters like Condé Nast and Bonnier, the ease of use of digital distribution platforms varies greatly, and can affect a publisher's opportunity for success.

Platforms for digital magazine distribution and consumption

Some of the most popular methods for distributing digital magazines today include both the digital storefronts of familiar technology companies—the Apple Newsstand, Google Play, Amazon—and of less well-known magazine specialists, such as Zinio, Magzter, Issuu, and others. A full catalog of today's digital magazine publishing software and distribution platforms would be too lengthy to include here; suffice it to say that magazine publishers have a great many options. To gain the greatest exposure and availability, major publishers have generally sought to make their magazines available across platforms, after generating

their digital editions using whichever software tools best suit their publication's needs. Major publishers often create versions of their publications that fit multiple standards, including those of the Apple iOS operating system; Google's Android system; e-readers, such as the Amazon Kindle and Barnes and Noble Nook; and basic PDF-like digital replicas for distributors such as Zinio.

For example, *O, The Oprah Magazine*, is available as of this writing in August 2013 as a standalone iPad app through the Apple Newsstand, as an Android app through Google Play, as a replica on Zinio and Magzter, and in Kindle and Nook e-reader editions. Clearly, Hearst, the publisher of *O*, puts significant resources into crafting each of these editions of the magazine, in addition to the magazine's monthly print edition, Web content, and social media outreach. The varying demands of these distribution platforms create a workload far greater than the simple layout of a print edition—and that's without considering the additional effort to design interactive digital advertising, to develop a coherent business model sustaining a range of digital products, and to market digital products to consumers. And, importantly, the use of any of these digital distribution platforms requires sharing revenues with the platform's owner; for example, Apple and Google each take a 30 percent cut of single-issue, subscription, and in-app sales.

The success to date of these digital editions with both readers and advertisers has been difficult to ascertain. Though Americans' time spent with digital media will likely surpass the time they spend with television for the first time in 2013, their interest in digital magazines appears rather weak.⁹ Only 22 percent of tablet owners read magazines on their devices at least once a week, and only 11 percent of smartphone owners read magazines on their phones.¹⁰ Digital replica circulation is projected to amount to only about 8 percent of paid magazine circulation by 2017.¹¹ Digital magazine subscriptions appeared to "soar" in 2012—from 3.2 million in the second half of 2011 to 7.9 million in the second half of 2012—but about a third of the total number of 2012 subscriptions reflected the promotional program of just one publication, *Game Informer*. Its digital subscriptions, provided with retailer GameStop's loyalty program, were more than eight times the number purchased for *Maxim*, which came in second.¹²

Yet publications are the second-ranked app category in the Apple iPad app sales charts, following only games; news and women's interest publications are most popular.¹³ And although the Association of Magazine Media's data include only 58 magazines, its most recent report (for the second quarter of 2013) showed fairly strong growth for digital magazine advertising, especially compared to print advertising pages: print pages fell 1 percent, while iPad advertising units increased almost 25 percent.¹⁴ Another recent survey shows 22 percent of publishers reporting that their smartphone and tablet apps are profitable, a number that may be interpreted with some optimism, considering that many such apps are given away for free in this relatively early stage of e-reading adoption.¹⁵

In general, the data presented here offer a mixed assessment of the present and future of digital magazine publishing, whether by one of the major companies or by a single person acting as an independent publisher.

Independent Magazines Today

Magazine types and creators' motives

Each segment of the magazine industry is positioned differently during this time of transition into digital platforms. The magazines included in this study primarily fit the “indie” type described by Le Masurier in her explication of print magazine types, which include “zines,” “fanzines,” and indies, in contrast to the mainstream consumer magazines whose status is described above.¹⁶ Zines, according to Le Masurier, are typically created by amateurs for personal expression, printed in small runs, and distributed for free or at a low cost. The zine may represent an expression of a unique subculture and seeks to connect those with shared interests in that subculture physically, via the printed page. By contrast, a fanzine is a response to another cultural text (e.g., a film), and is also typically a labor of love by a single individual or small group as an expression of and for a fan community.¹⁷

Finally, independent (“indie”) print magazines revolve around the editor’s (or an editorial collective’s) curation of materials that reflect personal involvement in the publication’s topic. That topic is typically some aspect of culture thought by the editor to be creatively represented and advanced through the existence of the magazine.¹⁸ The editor(s) are also often the owners of these publications. Indie print magazines’ operational details vary widely, but the overall goal is similar—the expression of a distinctive, often highly specific and idiosyncratic editorial philosophy. For example, as Le Masurier explains, the magazine’s topical interest and/or voice may be extremely tightly focused in ways that only the editor truly understands, or the editor may hope to generate specific emotions or reactions among the audience with the magazine’s design and/or content. These guiding philosophies are likely to be much more implicit, nuanced, and even eccentric at indie magazines than at mainstream magazines that involve more contributors and seek larger audiences.

Le Masurier’s study represents the sparse published research on indie magazines. Some researchers have analyzed zines.¹⁹ However, these studies have primarily addressed zines’ content with regard to the movements or groups they represent (e.g., what the content of a specific zine says about gender). Although she addresses only print publications, Le Masurier’s work on indie magazines offers the most insights for the current study through her synthesis of anecdotes and relevant research on other media topics. Therefore, we will refer often to this work as a reference point for this study on similar digital publications.

The significance of design for indie magazines

With regard to design, Le Masurier notes that most indie print magazines have a trained graphic designer involved in production, or have at least prioritized design improvement in the maturation of the print magazine. This emphasis on design reveals the

value that print indie editors place upon the concrete magazine object, even as its creation and marketing are enabled through the interactions fostered by digital media:

[W]hat can the magazine as a printed object offer that digital screens cannot? The indie producers have identified core elements of the printed magazine and pushed them to the foreground: the quality and tactility of the paper, format (size, shape, binding), the integration of words, images and space as an expression of graphic design specific to print, and the life and function of the magazine as a material object. All are untransferable elements in the experience of both making and reading a magazine.²⁰

Indie print publishers value the “novelty” and “retro” nature of their print publications, which they believe create unique experiences in an era of increasingly intangible media. Some of them experiment with the form of their publications beyond page layout, as in the case of *Asian Punk Boy* magazine, which is packaged in a wooden box; *Blank*, which is delivered to readers in a pizza box; or *Tank*, which emphasizes strength and power through a larger page size and integration of thick cardboard.²¹

The tangible, physical design experience may be a primary concern for digital indie publishers as well, though that concern must be communicated differently in the digital medium, which would involve new experiences of “tactility,” format, and “integration of words, images and space.” It may be also the case that “graphic design is content” for the digital indies, as Le Masurier says of indie print magazines, though in new ways.²² Moreover, the ability of indie digital magazine publishers to offer effective digital design that utilizes the advantages of digital interfaces, moving beyond simple digital replicas, may affect their success as publishers.

Indie publications' business models

Another distinction between print and digital indie magazine publishers may arise in this study's exploration of the business strategies of digital indie publishers. Indie print publications are usually “asset poor and imagination rich.”²³ While zine and fanzine publishers expect little or no profit—or take a loss—on their publications, indie print magazine publishers usually think differently: “Independent magazines may not be made purely or primarily for commercial gain, but they are deliberately made for sale, not as part of the gift or barter economy of zines.”²⁴ Some print indies are seen as a stepping stone toward greater commercial success for their creators, editors, and individual contributors, who may work for free at first, but hope to gain success either with the indie magazine or with other, more mainstream enterprises as a result of time invested in the indie publication.

The same may or may not be true of digital indie magazine publishers. Digital production and distribution costs are likely lower than those of all types of print magazine publishers because they have no printing and distribution costs; they incur only the costs of software and labor that print publishers might also face, and so might seem feasible projects to help accomplish a variety of financial goals. Finally, Le Masurier describes the global

opportunity for the distribution of indie print magazines to a worldwide audience of readers interested in their topics. Digital indie magazines would appear to have an even greater potential for global reach, given the much lower cost of distributing a digital versus paper product.

Research Questions

Because Le Masurier's work and other existing research does not address the unique situation of digital indie magazine publishers, this exploratory study examines the reasons why these publishers have chosen a different route from their print indie magazine peers. Given the increased technological demands, the need for financial investment and time for experimentation, and the mixed portents for all types of digital magazine publishing that are described above, creating an indie digital magazine without the resources of a major publisher looks like a daunting venture. This study, therefore, explores the following research questions to gain insight into why publishers undertake such an effort:

RQ1. What are the motives of indie digital magazine publishers for starting their publications?

RQ2. Why did these publishers select their publishing platform and distribution method?

RQ3. What is the business strategy, if any, of these publishers?

RQ4. From these publishers' perspective, what is the outlook for digital indie magazine publishing?

Method

This study used semi-structured, in-depth phone/Skype interviews to explore these questions with a variety of independent digital magazine founders and editors.

Participants

Identifying independent digital magazines and successfully contacting individuals responsible for them was a challenging initial task of this study. (The difficulty of locating indie digital magazines is a relevant concern for their publishers as well, which emerged as an issue in the interviews.) The researchers gathered names of magazines from various digital storefronts and from blog posts, news stories, or other Web sources. We then researched each magazine to determine its ownership, frequency, and recent publications. Labeling one's publication "a magazine" and publishing on a magazine-like interval—not continuously—was considered sufficient for Web publications, on the rationale that indie publishers who perceive themselves to be publishing a magazine would also perhaps have useful insights. Magazines that were determined to be independently operated, did not have corresponding print editions, and had published an issue within the preceding six to eight months were eligible for the study.

The researchers attempted to contact and schedule interviews with publishers at 32 magazines. Twelve interviews were completed. Of the remaining 20, only 2 publishers declined to participate. In both cases, the magazines had become reasonably successful and were undergoing significant, time-consuming expansion during the time period of the study. Four of the other non-participating magazines initially expressed interest in participating, but did not complete interviews. Because of the small staffs of these publications—in some cases just one person, many with other full-time jobs—it could be difficult for some to spare time to participate. Finally, 14 of the 20 non-participants simply did not respond at all to the invitation to be interviewed. Eleven of these offered only a generic Web-based form as a contact method for their publishers or editors, possibly reflecting a lack of clear leadership or of desire to engage with the public.

Though the overall rate of success in obtaining completed interviews was somewhat low, the researchers found that the 12 interviews eventually demonstrated a pattern of repetition of topics and issues in their responses, suggesting that an appropriate ending point for this exploratory study had been reached.²⁵ The 12 participating indie digital magazine publishers, from both the U.S. and Europe, represent diverse subject matters, publishing platforms, distribution methods, business strategies, and motivations (see Table 1).

Magazine	Topic	Platform	Web Address
<i>Astronaut</i>	Art and music	iPad	astronautmagazine.com
<i>Fan the Fire</i>	Film	PDF, Web	fanthefiremagazine.com
<i>Green Child</i>	Parenting	iPad	greenchildmagazine.com
<i>Indie Lovely</i>	DIY and crafts	Issuu	indielovely.com
<i>Katachi</i>	Design and lifestyle	iPad	katachimag.com
<i>Outland Moto</i>	Motorcycle travel	iPad	outlandmoto.com
<i>Spenser</i>	Food	Issuu	spensermag.com
<i>Symbolia</i>	Illustrated journalism	iPad, Kindle, PDF	symboliamag.com
<i>The Magazine</i>	Technology and culture	iPad, iPhone, Web	the-magazine.org
<i>Treehouse</i>	Literary	Web	treehousemag.com
<i>VIEW</i>	Photography	iPad	fusionlab.com/viewmagazine
<i>Yippee Ki-Yay!</i>	Film	iPad	ykymag.com

Founders and/or editors were typically the representatives interviewed from each independent digital publication. As Le Masurier notes, most indie print magazines are edited by their founders; this observation held true for their digital counterparts.²⁶ These founders/editors possess insights into the benefits of digital publishing, the economics of indie publishing, and the distinctive position of digital independent magazines in today's magazine industry.

Though the magazines are named above, the individuals representing them are not specifically named in the results below in order to protect their privacy and to permit them to speak freely about their publications and business. Accordingly, potentially identifying information has been redacted from quotations.

Interview procedure and data analysis

The interviews took place during July and August 2013, were conducted by phone or Skype, and ranged from 30 minutes to an hour in length. The interviews followed a semi-structured format around an outline of seven key questions, but were not confined exclusively to those questions. Questions were reordered and followed up as necessary to best bring forth the respondent's expertise and to address unexpected responses. This approach allowed for a shared construction of knowledge through the interaction between interviewee and interviewer.²⁷

The analysis of the interview data was structured around the research questions outlined above. The major themes of interviewees' responses were identified based on re-reading of the interview transcripts and discussion. King and Horrocks suggest that "themes" are ideas that emerge repeatedly within at least two to three interviews.²⁸ The material from the transcripts that addressed each apparent theme was organized into a single document through an informal coding process. Within each of these themes, the respondents offered sometimes converging, sometimes diverging perspectives; these contrasts offered further insights. In sum, the analysis of these qualitative interview data relied on "interpretation, summary, and integration."²⁹

Results and Discussion

The interviews demonstrated both the similarities and significant differences between print and digital indie magazine publishing. The two enterprises resemble each other because their founders and editors have similar motivations for creating their magazines and similar priorities with regard to the craftsmanship of their products. However, there are also distinctions in two major areas—the specific forms that this craftsmanship takes, and the ways that its expression is enabled or constrained by the design and business considerations of the digital publishing platforms with which these publishers must work. This section elaborates upon each of these similarities and differences.

Motives for independent digital magazine publishing

The indie publishers interviewed in this study mirrored their print publishing counterparts in their motivations for starting and maintaining their magazines. Like zine and indie print magazine founders, many of these digital publishers simply had an avid interest in a topic and some graphic design skill, and parlayed that combination into a magazine. As one publisher said, “[My magazine] is kind of a culmination of everything I’ve studied the last 20 years.” Another publishing team recognized an opportunity to produce something related to the industry in which they had worked for some time and for which they felt a passion: “We were enthusiasts on this topic ... Instead of doing it on a consultation basis, we decided to develop it for ourselves.” The indie digital magazine represented this publisher’s foray into the industry for himself, rather than merely as someone else’s employee. A desire for independence was echoed by another publisher, who said, “I fancied making something that was just on my own.” Finally, the combination of taking control and expressing a passion appealed to one editor: “This is something we all love. We’re all still volunteers. We want to see what it’s like to be the editors.”

These editors stated their desire to both express a personal interest and to create a product that would allow them to share that interest with others. However, these creators’ motives were not entirely “pure.” Many of them also sought to advance their careers or their businesses through their indie digital magazines, unlike zine/fanzine creators, and more like the indie print publishers Le Masurier profiles in her research. Many of these publishers either were themselves graphic designers or worked closely with a provider of graphic design services. Therefore, their magazines became assets for career advancement or company marketing tools, in addition to personal expressions. One indie magazine publisher obtained a “first real full-time job ... purely because of [my magazine]. I launched an agency and since then have only taken designer roles.” Other publishers found their magazines to be assets for advancing their design companies: “We can go to certain places and say, ‘We publish a magazine.’ It puts us in a different position as a design studio. ... It starts a discussion ... even if [the magazine] doesn’t sell, it has monetary value on it.” Similarly, another publisher said that prospective clients were “really excited ... because we have a magazine in the App Store. It got good reviews and a few awards, so they feel safe to talk to us—it gives the impression we know what we’re doing.”

In addition to creating magazines, some publishers also turned their digital publishing software or related tools into separate products, much as the major magazine company Bonnier did with its Mag+ software. As one publisher said, “In the first year, we viewed ourselves as a magazine. Now, we see ourselves as a tools company that uses magazines as our marketing system.” Clearly, this indie digital magazine was a launching pad for a different kind of enterprise, but it remained integral to this publisher’s overall business model.

Selection of publishing formats

Indie digital magazine publishers may have a passion to share with the world, but they also must make difficult practical decisions about their publishing platforms and strategies that significantly affect every aspect of their publications. The indie digital magazine publishers interviewed for this study were asked to explain why they had chosen to publish a digital magazine rather than a print publication. One of the most frequent responses, predictably, was cost. Digital publishing does not incur the costs of printing and distribution of paper issues, making the publication of a magazine on a narrow topic much more accessible, to both publisher and buyer. One European publisher indicated the difference in cost between digital and print magazines: “We charge €2.70 [for the digital publication]; it would be €10-12 in print.” Another respondent expressed that creating both print and iPad versions of the magazine would have been appealing, except for cost; this publisher spent only \$40 to make a digital-only magazine, as compared to hundreds or thousands of dollars for publishing and distributing a print magazine.

Digital publishing also removes the limits on the quantity of content that are imposed by printing costs. As one publisher said, “You don’t need nearly as much to support yourself in a digital environment. The content that we can provide can be much more robust because we aren’t counting spreads.” That ability to choose different types and greater quantities of content was also valued by another publisher, who said, “We’re able to publish similar quality material as a print magazine and get it to a wider range of people.... We don’t have to worry about [printing costs]. We’re able to have a little more freedom with what we publish.” Most respondents felt that digital publishing was the only real option for their magazines, for reasons of both cost and creative expression. One stated, “I don’t think I’d have done this had it not been a digital project.”

A basic digital magazine can be produced using any software that can generate a PDF-formatted file, or can even be hosted on a free Web service, such as WordPress.com. More sophisticated forms of digital publishing can be quite expensive, and adding more multimedia is costly. As one publisher observed, “To produce a high-quality digital editorial piece, you have to have three to ten times the amount of media” than for print. Digital embellishments can be expensive. One respondent said: “The barrier for entry is the tools that exist. If you want to do anything interesting, you’ll have to hire a team, or be able to code extensively. Not everyone can do this.” The question of investing in editorial quality or in interactive flourishes also arose: “Even subtle interactivity ... I know how much that costs, the attention it requires.... Every article becomes a programming task.” In other words, the more sophisticated the digital magazine in terms of design and interactivity, the more time and money it is likely to require, even if the creator already possesses advanced skills.

Insufficient resources to create interactive elements may be one reason why indie publishers struggle to gain attention for their magazines in a market dominated by major magazine publishers. As one respondent stated: “Big publishing houses can tell employees, ‘You have one week to go to Adobe school and learn the Publishing Suite.’ ... They can hire

three designers to work on *Wired*.” In contrast, most indie digital publishers’ products cannot stand out solely for technical sophistication.

Despite these challenges, the interviewed indie publishers expressed a great deal of concern for the design quality of their magazines and for the resulting reader experience. This concern is similar to that identified in Le Masurier’s research on print publishers. The so-called “untransferable elements” of the print magazine experience were considered highest priority, with design elevated to the level of content. Similarly, the qualities of “format,” “tactility,” and the “integration of words, image, and space,” identified by Le Masurier in indie print magazines,³⁰ are redefined in the digital context. Format becomes the screen of a device or computer monitor; tactility becomes the contact of a fingertip with a touch screen or touchpad for swiping or tapping; and words and image cohabit within a fluid, dynamic, interactive digital space. The digital magazine “canvas” offers freedom for experimentation, as one respondent explained:

We are using [interaction] very carefully.... We don’t have a lot of riddles to solve or buttons to touch. We can play with photography and create something with layers which we could not do [in print]. It would be really expensive to have transparent pages, and three of them. This is a big advantage of the digital magazine, that you can play around with the content and try to present it in a fresh way, without having to give a lot of money to the printer. It offers a small creative freedom.

That freedom includes the ability to “create a story environment with interactive elements you can’t get in a print edition.... A story has an atmosphere and tone you can’t get in a print edition,” according to another respondent. The digital format provides many new design opportunities.

In addition to redefining the look and feel of magazine content, some respondents also saw themselves as creating new ways to organize magazines, thereby altering readers’ fundamental experiences of the medium. Because the digital magazine itself is such a new medium, there is room for experimentation not only in the visual appearance and interaction with the content, but also in the standard components of magazines as audiences know them. For example, a magazine might be organized without traditional front-of-book and back-of-book departments and columns, and instead simply present arrays of photographs or a series of individual, long-form articles. Some of the indie digital publishers took advantage of this freedom to experiment with typical magazine characteristics. One respondent sought to create a publication “more about visuals, less about reading. There’s very little amount of text. It can go to many countries, and no translation is needed. My hope with the magazine is that it is something new and unusual.” Another wanted to experiment with the reader’s experience of the publication as a compilation of articles: “In print, you have to provide a framework and think about pacing.... We’re much more focused on the article as a unit.... We loosely group things in an issue. People access the articles individually.” Independent

digital publishing allows these editors to pursue the form that best suits their content and to create a unique feel for their publications.

Moreover, pursuing a magazine-type format was perceived to be a distinctive decision, as opposed to just creating a website or blog. For most respondents, crafting a magazine-style publication—even in its loosest form, on the Web-based magazines included here—was a way to involve the reader in an experience deliberately isolated, even protected, from the hubbub and constant flow of online content. The intent was to engage the reader in a more profound and focused shared moment. As one publisher said, “The experience on the iPad is a close experience, intimate.” Some respondents favored the concept of a magazine issue that is complete in itself, and that can actually be completed by the reader. They argued that this model still has value and can be instantiated in digital magazine publishing: “The app is not continuously publishing. For readers, there’s an advantage to a model where there’s not a raging river” of content that can never be fully consumed.

Some of the interviewed publishers had detailed design philosophies that could be digitally implemented in a wider variety of forms and styles than they could ever be in print magazines. However, the design decisions made by these publishers cannot be divorced from the publishing tools and distribution platforms they select. This inevitable linkage between the publisher’s creative goals, publishing method, and business strategies is an important point of contrast with print publishing. A print magazine publisher can craft any combination of text and image; as long as it fits on a sheet of paper and meets basic technical requirements, a printer will probably be willing to print the magazine, with no further financial stake after receiving payment for printing. Distribution can easily be arranged at low or no cost. As one publisher said, “If you’re running a print magazine, you can find a distributor that believes in your product and can find a big audience . . . if you can get into the right parts of town that are interested in the niche, and people can see” the magazine. If the magazine suits advertisers’ interests and audiences’ tastes and habits, the publisher can recoup costs or generate profit.

Digital magazine publishers encounter different demands. Costs of production can be kept low, making it easier for a dedicated individual to finance production personally, if needed. Audience demand becomes irrelevant or even unnecessary. However, publishing tools and distribution platforms set a variety of standards for digital publishers, including the size and shape of e-reading devices; the formatting and/or coding of digital editions or apps; and even distributor approval of the digital magazine prior to sale (as in the case of Apple). One respondent expressed a sense of constant uncertainty due to these requirements: “Who knows how the App Store will change?” In addition, each publishing software suite (e.g., Adobe DPS, Mag+) allows publishers to create certain kinds of content and design more easily, such as prescribed layouts, interactive features, and animations. Design that is unique or customized is more time-consuming or even impossible for some publishers to code by hand, as described above. One publisher explained why their magazine’s interactivity is much like that of other apps: “We all use very similar metaphors for navigation, structure, and issue size, because of limitations and features Apple gives us. To make a unique behavior, you have

to do programming.” Extending a digital magazine to other platforms requires still more effort because of the lack of standardization and compatibility among platforms: “[Apple’s] iOS has very strong standards; we know what we’re developing for.... To ensure the user experience is going to be consistent, we haven’t been able to address” creating the magazine for Android users.

Creativity in digital magazine design is therefore limited by the publisher’s need to rely on existing, readily accessible tools, if lacking the ability to code from scratch. The inextricable nature of design, publishing method, and business strategy (as addressed in the next section) makes these indie publishers subject to the vicissitudes of their platforms’ changing standards and policies. The indie digital publishers have little power in this relationship compared to major magazine publishers, whose greater resources help them adapt to platform changes on the fly.

Business strategies

The selection of a distribution platform also affects an indie digital magazine publisher’s available business strategies. For example, the magazine-hosting site Issuu, used by some of the respondents, does not offer subscriptions. Therefore, revenue, if desired, must come from other sources, such as advertising, sponsorships, or magazine-branded products. (Not all indie publishers in this study are seeking to generate revenue from their publications, as described above.)

Sponsorships, advertising, and subscriptions. None of the respondents mentioned sponsorship as part of their business models. With some difficulty, some have persuaded companies to advertise in their digital publications, and even to use digital ads’ interactive possibilities. Some advertisers have been skeptical, as one respondent described: “The advertising market for digital magazines is complicated ... people are clueless about digital magazines. ‘What’s the difference from a website? Why should I advertise in a digital magazine?’” Another publisher had found the confusion almost insurmountable, saying, “I still don’t think advertisers get it. I offer them a print-quality, full-page ad, but ... they are not getting what is available on digital.” However, one respondent focused on the advantages of the digital magazine format for advertisers: “[The ad is] up there forever. They can even change the campaign. It’s a benefit—they can stay engaged for a one-time cost. The [magazine] on Issuu lives beyond its three months on the landing page.” In general, selling advertising for these indie digital magazines seemed to be an uphill battle.

For those using subscriptions and (in only one case) a paywalled website, enticing digital audiences to purchase paid content was also a struggle. As one publisher put it, magazines sold in Apple’s App Store are “not just going up against other magazines, but also against other apps, like Angry Birds, where you pay little for a lot of time and unlimited updates.” It can be difficult to “help users understand what kind of work goes into our content” and justify the cost. However, as one publisher indicated, passionate niche audiences can be fervent enough to support a magazine through a transition from free to

paid reading: “People have told us, ‘Charge for this.... Please don’t ever stop doing this. We’re all in.’”

Marketing and exposure. All respondents faced challenges in getting exposure for their indie publications. Many of them use the Apple Newsstand, but reviews of its marketing efficacy were mixed. One complaint, echoed by multiple publishers, was that the Newsstand promises to manage marketing, distribution, and subscription processing, but does not fulfill that promise. As one explained, “Apple has provided a business model for people to leverage and actually monetize all this [publishing] ambition ... [but] anyone going into the Newsstand is dead before they start. It’s a graveyard.” Another Newsstand skeptic said, “Apple is acting like there’s a vital magazine scene on the App Store, but I don’t see it. I know only about 10 indie magazines on the App Store that I consider real magazines.”

However, another respondent endorsed the Apple Newsstand as “a way to provide content to people in a place that is appropriate for it,” which benefits from “the size of the audience and the fact that Apple guides people to it.” For one publisher, “working with the Newsstand allows us to monetize content a little more efficiently than on the Web.” Still another respondent described the Newsstand as a “democracy of content,” in which indie digital magazines could be featured alongside those of major publishers. Other indie publishers indicated two elements that might predict an indie digital magazine’s success on the Newsstand: whether Apple chooses to “feature” a specific magazine, based on its own editorial judgment and prerogative; and whether a magazine does well enough, on its own or with Apple’s help, to appear in sales rankings, helping it rise above the sea of content and become noticeable.

Another limiting factor of the Newsstand publishers cited was its lack of truly global publishing, which can be both structural and content-dependent. One Europe-based publisher said that while the magazine had been successful in Europe, the U.S. market was “a black hole for us. It’s proven nearly impossible to break into the market.” Respondents’ experiences suggested that Apple does not facilitate magazine marketing across its international Newsstand storefronts, thereby making it difficult to reach audiences elsewhere. Furthermore, the type of content in a magazine could affect its global appeal; highly visual magazines, for example, would likely be more successful than those reliant on text. This finding belies the common belief that digital publishing is inherently more global in nature. In reality, restrictions put in place by digital storefronts, such as Apple, and the nature of the content can limit a publication’s worldwide reach.

Many indie publishers reported that their marketing attempts had met with limited success. These efforts included search engine optimization, press releases both to mainstream media and specialized bloggers, and Facebook advertising (which affected subscriptions “not a blip,” according to one respondent). As one publisher said, “There isn’t a one-stop place to find independent digital magazines” as of yet. The only marketing method thought certain by a few publishers was to have “a known persona ... a ‘star level’ of companies or people

[backing the magazine] ... Apple will spotlight them,” immediately boosting their publications’ popularity.

Creating multiple revenue streams. Because the revenue from their digital publications was relatively weak and/or uncertain, indie publishers seeking to make money were sometimes cultivating other related ways to generate revenue. One magazine was experimenting with the integration of in-app shopping into its pages, allowing a reader to buy products directly through the magazine, which would provide the magazine a commission on those sales. Another magazine had developed a record label with the same brand name and sponsored local music events. Another was working on a print collection of content that had previously appeared digitally. As one publisher stated, “Subscription revenue is fine, but it has to be part of an ecosystem” of revenue-generating efforts.

This strategy mimics the approach recently adopted by many mainstream consumer magazines, which are experimenting with “bookazines,” events, sponsored social media outreach, branded digital apps, and sponsored print/digital content (also known as “native advertising”). Each of these may bring in relatively little revenue on its own, especially compared to the primary print and digital editions of a magazine, but every revenue stream contributes to the success of a publication and can be invested in future innovation. This approach has succeeded at *The Atlantic*, which tries to employ its “brand power to grab revenue wherever you can.”³¹ *The Atlantic* is widely cited as one of the most successful magazines in diversifying its revenue beyond its print publication. Independent magazines that can create an “ecosystem” of revenue generation might be able to create a sustainable business, while also remaining true to their editorial philosophies and design values.

Independent digital magazine publishers’ predictions for the future

The publishers interviewed here had varying levels of optimism about indie digital magazines’ future. They named specific challenges, including the need for more powerful publishing tools, the disconnect between the worlds of indie print and digital publishing, and the need to be able to publish across platforms and devices.

The first two challenges are related. Digital publishing tools become increasingly sophisticated with every iteration, and yet are increasingly accessible in terms of cost. However, some digital publishers emphasized the difficulty of marketing a digital-only product; a print edition was thought to be a valuable marketing tool, if not the ideal method for expressing their visions as publishers. They hoped that the recently invigorated indie print magazine publishing community would cross over and develop digital editions of their publications. However, as one publisher noted,

There’s a vibrant indie mag publishing environment that doesn’t bother with digital because they don’t have the skills.... They have an astigmatism toward technology, a lack of language for it. They understand “masthead” and “pull quotes,” but they don’t necessarily have a language for the interactive opportunities.

Even if an indie print publisher (who may be “already struggling,” as one respondent said, to complete print editions) is open to the digital possibilities, it is likely to be a difficult process. As one respondent explained, when print publishers start to think about “how they can put content in a print issue into a digital format, they see how expensive the solutions are. You’re paying license fees for solutions, but not one piece of code has been written.” The learning curve can be steep. Respondents said that more accessible and powerful design tools are needed to enable established indie print publishers to explore the possibilities of digital.

A related problem is the challenge of publishing one’s creation across a range of digital devices, while addressing the technical and audience demands of each. One publisher called this “the next big trick ... a huge design challenge. It’s something we’re working on.” Without being able to reach all types of audiences with their publications, prospective indie digital publishers might not be willing to develop new products. That is, if those audiences are even ready to embrace digital magazines: “People aren’t going out searching for digital magazines at this point,” said one respondent. And the entire publication process is daunting, as a publisher summarized it: “You have to overcome so many obstacles that you don’t see in the beginning.... You need a lot of money, or a lot of friends, or a lot of interns to somehow make it happen.”

Overall, however, some respondents were quite positive about their experiences and the possibilities for other publishers to participate in the indie digital magazine realm. As one said, “You can make a magazine out of nothing and get it out there. The only outlay is your own personal time.... You can just make it and have a chance for success rather than do nothing.” Another was amazed at the speed of change: “Four years ago, if you told me I’d be publishing a quarterly magazine, I’d say, ‘How do I even go that direction?’” Despite the unclear path and its challenges, the magazine had succeeded.

Conclusion

This study provides only an early and small-scale look at the world of indie digital magazine publishing. A survey of these publishers, even though they are difficult to identify and contact, might provide a wider range of data. An ethnographic study of indie digital magazine publishers—much like that proposed by Le Masurier of print indie publishers—could further illuminate the differences between print and digital publishers and their work.

Because all types of digital magazine publishing are in such an early phase of development and adoption, it would be valuable to continue monitoring the diversity and success of different types of publications within this field. Many industry insiders already closely observe print magazines, but the accessibility of digital publishing by diverse magazine creators should also be observed. Just a few major publishers, as described above, have long dominated the mainstream consumer magazine industry. The vitality of a range of voices in this medium is essential to sustaining its diversity in both print and digital formats.

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