Book Review: The Art of Making Magazines

David E. Sumner, Ball State University
sumner@bsu.edu


The Art of Making Magazines contains essays adapted from lectures given at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism between 2002 and 2012 by a dozen notable magazine writers, editors, and publishers. They were invited to speak at the George Delacorte Lecture Series for students in Columbia’s graduate program in magazine journalism. Some of the contributors’ names, such as Tina Brown and Felix Dennis, are quite familiar. While others are less known, each has made significant achievements as an author, editor, art director, or publisher. I felt the best way to begin this review is by giving the contributors’ names and titles of each of their chapters.

5. “Fact-Checking at The New Yorker,” Peter Canby, senior editor and head of the fact-checking department at The New Yorker.
7. “How to Talk to the Art Director,” Chris Dixon, design director at Vanity Fair and former art editor at other magazines.

David E. Sumner is a professor and coordinator of the magazine journalism program at Ball State University. He has authored or co-authored three books about magazines. He does freelance writing for magazines and is currently working on a screenplay.
I thought the most interesting chapter was “Three Weddings and a Funeral” by Tina Brown, which was worth the price of the book. Brown reveals behind-the-scenes experiences from her years as a successful editor at Vanity Fair, The New Yorker, Talk, and now at Newsweek and The Daily Beast. She talks about crucial decisions she made after arriving at each magazine that helped shape its content and future. She also talks frankly about the short-lived Talk magazine, which she helped launch. This chapter will give students insight into the diverse elements of successful magazines, which include editorial content, design, business considerations, and the changing ethos and social environment of the times.

Peter Canby’s chapter “Fact-Checking at The New Yorker” was also revealing and thought-provoking. Canby supervises 16 fact-checkers at the magazine, and he explains in detail how he and his staff do their jobs. He details how the famous Janet Malcolm story and Jeffrey Masson’s libel suit against the magazine changed their fact-checking process. “After the Malcolm case was settled, we began to ask writers to include their notes, their tapes, and their transcripts with their source material, and this gave us a great deal more flexibility in how we approach stories,” he wrote.

The primary weakness of a collection of essays is that it lacks the coherency and unity of one book written by one author for one purpose. Each speaker and author had a different purpose in mind. Most of the speakers tell anecdotes and stories from their years of experience and offer a few practical tips to students. The book does not contain specific “how to” information that might be useful in a magazine editing or publishing class. As the editors note in the introduction, “this is not a how-to book, but it is, in many respects, a “how-to-think-about it” book.

It could serve as a supplementary text, but I don’t recommend it as a required textbook for classes in magazine publishing or editing. I do recommend it as an excellent resource for professors in preparing lectures and classroom activities.