Book Review: The Magazine from Cover to Cover

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Have you ever questioned the continued usefulness of a course in magazine production? *Newsweek* as a print magazine has gone under. *Time* is looking mighty thin. Are we teaching for a dying medium?

You wouldn’t know it to judge by the enthusiasm in the production course I teach. The appeal of producing an actual trimmed and bound issue of a tangible magazine is as profound as it is novel to a generation who were creating their own blogs in junior high. Maybe it’s like inviting students to go up in one of the Wright brothers’ gliders, exciting because it’s so arcane. Or taking out a gaff-rigged sloop in the age of the jet ski. But just drop by a magazine production course when the proofs come back from the printer. This is far better than that digital Internet thingy.

Since 1999 we’ve had a strong textbook, *The Magazine from Cover to Cover*, by Samuye Johnson and Patricia Prijatel. The authors are not gloomy about the future of magazines either. One of their charts happily pays tribute to magazines that have passed the century mark. And elsewhere they point out that, even with so many magazine closures, there are still many, many new launches each year.

The third edition of this text was released last October, an update I’m mostly thrilled to have my students use. A second and extensively revised edition had been released previously in 2006, which seems like eons ago in the world of print journalism.

Some revised textbooks have the look of a nice tweed jacket with corduroy elbow patches: They look respectable, but there’s no mistaking what’s been added and where. Rather than re-tailoring the entire book, some authors make the most expedient additions where needed, regardless of how it flows. Serviceable, if not exactly elegant.

Nothing like that with Johnson and Prijatel. Their update is smooth and seamless, and you may be hard pressed to identify where many of the smaller updates have been made beyond the obvious update, chapter two, “The Magazine in a Digital World.”

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Their research and analysis seemed spot on this spring when my class used the text, especially the charts tracking usage of various mobile devices. Not just who’s using mobile devices, but where. (Pay attention, entrepreneurs of tomorrow!)

But if Johnson and Prijatel don’t know any better than the rest of us exactly where all this digital evolution will eventually lead—and why should they? That’s the problem with this new chapter two. As good as it is right now, it will also probably be the first part of the book to become outdated. Not their fault, mind you—just a condition of the rapidly changing here and now. It may not look wrong in the years ahead, just dated, or worse, obvious.

This book is clearly a labor of love from journalism professors who genuinely love magazines, their history, and their many incarnations and manifestations through the last two and a half centuries. They are not alone; there are many of us.

I love, for instance, that this textbook takes you all the way back to a number of examples in the 18th century AFTER explaining what the modern word “magazine” has to do with the 18th-century military term. Yeah, I’m that kind of journalism professor, although admittedly some of my students look at me with expressions that say, “Great, but how’s THAT going to help me produce a magazine THIS semester?”

The book is thorough in nearly all respects, covering organization, staffing, advertising, and distribution issues in depth in addition to all the expected editorial topics. I particularly like the examination of case studies of glorious successes as well as failures. Is it just me, or does that approach seem particularly poignant at this moment in the publishing world?

I admit to wanting to re-arrange the book’s chapters. What instructor doesn’t? I’m just not sure I want to wait until chapter 12 to tackle libel, prior restraint, copyright, and invasion of privacy issues. With some classes that chapter should be the first reading assignment.

Every aspect of journalism should be covered by textbooks as comprehensive as this one, but I do have one substantial complaint about this book.

The illustrations are stuck in cover mode. An overwhelming majority of illustrations are covers. Only a miniscule handful of interior layouts are shown, and those tend to be from a half century ago or before.

Time after time the text makes interesting points, such as when we are told that Harper’s is one of the few magazines to continue a tradition of publishing short works of fiction. But the photo caption that tells us this sits bewilderingly underneath an image of a Harper’s cover. We don’t get to see how a piece of fiction is laid out or what kind of illustration or typographic treatment Harper’s gives it.
When we introduce students to the idea that *Consumer Reports* accepts no advertising, wouldn’t it be useful to show how frugal the layout team has to be when designing pages and charts?

A sidebar about multiple points of entry into text, remarkably, carries no illustration whatsoever. The same is true of a sidebar entitled “Photos pack a wallop.” Alas, here, too, nothing to look at. All but one of the illustrations in the chapter on design show covers. Really, how much can a student learn about the issues involved in magazine design if only a single illustration in that chapter shows magazine interiors?

*Magazines from Cover to Cover* is a wonderful, comprehensive, and otherwise thorough textbook. I’m grateful for its depth and thoroughness. But its visual presentation is limited and disappointing in covering a topic that itself is so dependent on the visual.