

## Book Review: It's Not All Rainbows and Unicorns in the Brave Digital World

Miglena Sternadori, University of South Dakota  
miglena.sternadori@usd.edu

**Remake, Remodel: Women's Magazines in the Digital Age.** Brooke Erin Duffy. (Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013). 208 pp. \$85 cloth, \$25 paper, \$12.49 Kindle.

Once upon a time, women's glossies were mere objects rather than brands. Readers lacked empowerment, since they had no Facebook and Twitter accounts to share their favorite brands with their "friends." And interactivity...did not even exist! Thank goodness, these Cinderella times are gone. Check your app store. Welcome, digital democracy.

Readers wishing to probe deeper into this glittering rhetoric should consider Brooke Erin Duffy's *Remake, Remodel*, which offers an insightful and multifaceted account of the magazine industry's transformation. Based on more than 30 in-depth interviews with magazine professionals—from editorial assistants to executives—the book explores organizational, professional, and gender identity challenges facing women's magazines, which Duffy chose to analyze because of their status as a distinct genre, deeply intertwined with consumerist culture.

Spoiler alert: Duffy is not a new media celebrant. She argues that "notions of sweeping changes in the media system and wholly opened-up professional spaces are exaggerated," and that behind the "thin veil of optimism lie individual and organizational practices that continue to affirm the particularities of various media." The book describes several ways in which the digital revolution has not been exactly a positive development for the women's magazine genre.

First, content is becoming increasingly standardized in order to flow among platforms and for search engine optimization. This means no more flowery twists and puns that print magazines used to be known for. As one former Hearst employee explains: "[O]riginality dies, and a site's content becomes watered down as much as reality television show that runs for more seasons than the average length of a college education." Content is also increasingly shared among brands within the same publishing company as a way to cut production costs. You thought you were reading *Marie Claire*? Um...actually, it might be content shared among several of Hearst's brands.

---

*Miglena Sternadori is an associate professor of journalism at the University of South Dakota. Her research focuses on gender and sexuality in the media, as well as stereotypes, implicit bias, and cognitive processing of information.*

Second, advertisers are in bed with magazine publishers, who offer agency-like services (Don Draper, in 2014 you might be sitting in a magazine office). And they accomplish this at a much lower cost because magazine ad reps are expected to do both creative and account-planning work. Sometimes, magazines themselves are the advertisers. Several have expanded their brands by selling beauty and home products—such as *Seventeen's* jewelry, prom, and *bedding* collections.

Third, editors have become “brand managers” (or “camp counselors,” as one interviewee aptly described his new duties). Instead of simply overseeing the work of trained professionals, they now have to edit user-generated content, initiate special events and product developments, and think about the web, iPad, and TV “angles.”

Fourth, writers—who often also do layout, blog, shoot video, and create content for advertising partners—hardly know their amorphous digital audience. Many readers arrive to magazine websites through online searches, and, duped, stay for only a few seconds, never to return. In creating supposedly enticing content for these online audiences, magazine professionals tend to assume that they are younger, less affluent, and can tolerate “racier” stories. But who knows? Although real-time metrics allow magazines to know how many readers clicked on a link or bought an advertised product, they offer no insight into who they are as a whole. As Duffy puts it, “while knowledge is augmented at the individual level, it decreases at the aggregate level.”

Fifth, gender dynamics are changing, with the potential to transform the genre's culture and its “gendered hierarchies of value.” Digital specialists (mostly male) increasingly have the power to assign and veto content, dominating the organizational division of labor in women's magazines, a traditionally women's career field that has offered opportunities for female advancement for more than a century. Here is how a female editorial assistant describes the new invisible hand constraining her work:

Once in a while, we'll say, “Why don't we do...quizzes or whatever, XYZ? And our editorial director of the website will say, “Condé Nast Digital doesn't want us doing that anymore.” And you're like, “Who is this monolith—who are they even to decide any ideas? And it's very vague—I don't know who they are. I don't understand how crucial they are to our process. But they're like the Wizard of Oz.

Although these frustrating changes are trumpeted as part of the digital revolution, “individual media workers may still cling to the practices and values woven into the culture of a particular medium,” writes Duffy. Yet, their power is more and more limited. They are no longer the sole purveyors of magazine “work” as they face competition from fashion bloggers and, implicitly, also from “empowered” female readers who contribute content and promote their favorite brands through a “labor of devotion,” thus benefitting media owners and advertisers.

*Remake, Remodel* is not intended as a harsh attack on new media's participatory culture, but it aims (and succeeds) in presenting "a more nuanced view" of the magazine industry than most other recent accounts. It is thus an excellent resource for both scholars and teachers.