

**Digital Excellence in U.S. Magazines:
An Analysis of National Magazine Award Categories and Calls**

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Abstract

This study examines the categories and calls for entry for the digital National Magazine Awards from 1998 to 2016. Researchers tracked the addition and subtraction of digital categories and analyzed calls for entries to determine how definitions of excellence in magazine journalism have changed. Researchers found that new technology and media platforms create different standards of excellence than traditional print editorial content does. By considering brand extensions beyond the traditional editorial scope and considering a magazine's financial health as a standard of excellence, the Magazine of the Year award further alters the way prizes assess a publication's caliber.

Keywords: magazines, journalism awards, digital, National Magazine Awards

Introduction

For 50 years, the American Society of Magazine Editors (ASME) has honored the best in magazine journalism by sponsoring the National Magazine Awards. However, much has changed since *Look* won the first award in 1966. According to the Association of Magazine Media, magazine audiences in 2015 consumed magazine content in print, on tablets, via the mobile web, and through video.¹ As the industry changed, so did the awards, with new categories and criteria mirroring a shifting media landscape. How the U.S. magazine industry judges and honors itself can give scholars and practitioners insight into industry changes and redefined standards of excellence.

Although there is not a great deal of research about the National Magazine Awards in particular, the literature does clearly identify national journalism awards as indicators of excellence.² Awards confer quality³ and prestige.⁴ They are also a way to assess a publication's caliber in the industry.⁵ There are downsides to journalism awards, too. Some newspaper editors have admitted to feeling pressure to win prizes or to use prizes to gain favor with their superiors.⁶ Publications can also create content meant to impress contest judges instead of the publication's audience.⁷

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Judges use a variety of criteria to evaluate award-winning journalism. Judges of magazine contests value writing above all else, though they also consider reporting and originality when determining excellence.⁸ Pulitzer judges value ethics as well as content⁹ and praise work that affects change.¹⁰

As a magazine journalist, I spent a not inconsiderable amount of time huddled with my bosses trying to figure out what pieces to submit for which category. The criteria—especially for digital awards—changed year to year, and we editors parsed the call for entries to divine what might appeal to judges. As a scholar, these calls interested me in new ways. How did the award criteria change from year to year? How might those changes redefine excellence in magazine journalism?

Methodology

The data to consider these questions came from two sources: the ASME “Winners and Finalists Database”¹¹ and the National Magazine Awards Call for Entries from 1998 through 2016.¹² (The awards honor content published in the previous year.) Judges first conferred a special award for General Excellence in New Media in 1997.

Data analysis showed the addition and subtraction of National Magazine Award categories honoring digital media between 1998 and 2016. The content of the calls demonstrates evolving award definitions and criteria. Here, a qualitative analysis of the text allowed researchers to explore how changes in the awards and their judging criteria have redefined magazine excellence.

Expansion and Contraction of Digital Awards Categories

National Magazine Awards categories have changed considerably since the advent of digital media. As noted, judges first recognized what was then called “new media” in 1997 with a special award. ASME added General Excellence in New Media as a standing category in 1998 until 2001, when General Excellence Online became the main digital category, through 2009. ASME offered an award for Interactive Feature from 2007 to 2009, as well as for Interactive Service (2007), later known as Personal Service Online (2008-2009).

ASME expanded digital categories significantly in 2010. In the dozen years prior, no more than three NMA categories ever specified digital media. However, in 2010, 12 categories honored “websites and online-only magazines:” General Excellence-Digital Media, Mobile Media, Design-Digital Media, Photography-Digital Media, News Reporting, Blogging, Regular Department or Section, Multimedia Feature or Package, Interactive Tool, Podcasting, Video, and Community. An additional category, Magazine of the Year, honored “magazines that are superior in print or online.”

In 2011, ASME tinkered with NMA digital categories again. The General Excellence category, similar to its print counterpart, divided entries into “two categories determined by content and audience”: News and Opinion and Service and Lifestyle. Other digital categories offered that year remain the same as 2010 (though with slightly different names, such as Online Department) with the exception of the Community award, which ASME eliminated.

The General Excellence award reverted to only one category in 2012. New categories added that year include Tablet Edition, Commentary, Utility App, and the re-emergence of a digital award in Personal Service. No awards were offered for Photography, Podcasts, or Blogging.

The NMA 2013 Call for Entries noted that digital and print awards, which for several years had been presented at different events, would be “consolidated to reflect the growing integration of print and digital media.” Digital categories that year were limited to: General Excellence, Website, Tablet Magazine, Utility App, Multimedia, and Video. Digital categories in Commentary and Personal Service were suspended.

The oldest digital NMA category, General Excellence, was suspended in 2014. Instead, ASME invited digital-only magazines (magazines without a print counterpart) to compete with print magazines for General Excellence awards divided into content areas for General Interest; Service and Lifestyle; Style and Design; Active Interest; Special Interest; and Literature, Science and Politics. Only four categories in 2014 were limited to digital media: Website, Tablet Magazine, Multimedia, and Video. A Feature Photography category opened to both print and digital entries. These awards, along with the categorization of General Excellence, remained stable in 2015.

The 2016 awards reconfigured the hybrid General Excellence categories to News, Sports and Entertainment; Service and Lifestyle; Special Interest; and Literature, Science and Politics. While the Website and Multimedia categories remained on the NMA roster, the Tablet Magazine category was eliminated.

In addition to awards reserved for digital media, several NMA writing categories that were print-only in the 1990s expanded to include digital contenders. Beginning in 2007, “pieces published online” could be entered in the following writing categories: Essays, Columns and Commentary, and Reviews and Criticism. Online publications could also, beginning in 2008, submit pieces to the Reporting, Public Interest, Feature Writing, Profile Writing, and Fiction categories. (Feature Writing absorbed the Profile Writing category in 2013.) In 2015, the Personal Service and Leisure Interests categories expanded to include digital entries.

Changing Criteria for Magazine Excellence

Changes to digital category criteria have redefined excellence in magazine journalism. From 1998 to 2006, the main digital award was for general excellence. In 1998, the award honored “an interactive publication that most effectively serves its intended audience and reflects an outstanding level of interactivity, journalistic integrity, and service.” The winning website “must possess a strong editorial identity and original content” and could be independent or affiliated with a print magazine. By 2000, ASME required entries in this category to “be a site that originated from an existing print magazine or group of magazines,” though that restriction was abandoned the following year. Language added to this category required the website to be “updated at regular intervals” (2001) or “create an entirely original ‘magazine environment’ on the web” (2002), though these criteria were not further defined. The first mention of “weblogs” in NMA calls appeared in the General Excellence category in 2004.

With the addition of the Best Interactive Design category in 2001, judges looked for “exceptional use of the visual medium to serve its intended audience (i.e., interactive applications along with clear navigation and ease of use.” The winning site would have “innovative visual presentation that enhances its mission as well as the user experience.” Subsequent award categories that focused on interactivity honored “a site’s creative use of multimedia technology, user involvement, personalization, and/or community tools, and must go beyond the simple display of text or images on a screen” (2007). These criteria later expanded to include “exceptional work in the blog form” (2008) but got less specific in 2009 by honoring “a website that uses multimedia technology, tools, community platforms, or other interactive formats.” The creation of the Interactive Tool category in 2010 rewarded technology over content, praising “the outstanding use of an interactive tool, multimedia technology, community platform, or software application, including mobile applications, that significantly augments the journalistic value of the website and enhances user experience.” In 2011, the category’s final year, it focused on “single-purpose interactive utilities, including mobile apps, that enable users to perform tasks or access, generate, manage, or share content,” though judges were instructed to “evaluate entries based on the quality of both content and technology.”

Mobile applications, first mentioned in the Interactive Tool category in 2010, got their own award category beginning in 2012. The call describes the Utility App category as honoring “single-purpose apps distributed on mobile devices, including tablets and smartphones ... [that] enable users to perform tasks or manage content. Judges were asked to look at both technology and content, and content need not be original to the app. The Tablet Edition category, also introduced in 2012, required entries to include “an array of content in a variety of forms,” such as news, commentary, and service. Judges evaluated entries based on the quality of the editorial, design, functionality, and “the use of technology, especially interactivity and multimedia, to engage media consumers.”

The digital design categories regularly invoked not only aesthetics but also functionality and user experience (2010-2012). Later, “functional and visual excellence” was folded into the Website award (2013-2016).

A standalone Multimedia category, first introduced in 2010, offered suggestions for content, paired and packaged with “traditional editorial skills,” that would meet the criteria: slideshows, podcasts, video, databases, interactive tools, and social media. Later calls did not specify types of multimedia content.

NMA calls sometimes broke out those multimedia elements into separate categories. The Video category, launched in 2010, considered entries based on originality, reporting, and production quality, while service-journalism videos were also judged on “the usefulness of the instruction or advice they contain.” By 2012, the Video category included user-generated content. The Podcast category, introduced in 2010 and discontinued after 2011, honored “audio presentations, released episodically,” that reported news, offered commentary or analysis, or conveyed instruction or advice.

Web-specific writing, such as blogging, was its own category in 2010 before being folded into other categories as a content type. The initial Blogging category incorporated reporting,

commentary, and criticism “published in the form of a blog,” though blog is never defined. (Prior to the Blogging category, “Weblogs” were eligible for the General Excellence Online award in 2004.) In 2011, NMA judges evaluated the blogger’s “expressiveness and insight.”

As noted above, community was a factor in categories that focused on interactivity. In 2010, the Community category, awarded only in that year, recognized “outstanding use of editorial skill, proprietary content, interactive technology, and social media to establish and sustain user communities.” Entrants in this category submitted quantitative data about the size of their online community and description of editorial practices. In 2011 and beyond, social media were included in the call for the Digital General Excellence Award and Magazine of the Year.

The Magazine of the Year category, which debuted in 2010, has honored magazines “that are superior both in print and online.” and those titles that successfully integrate print, digital, and mobile content. In 2011, ASME first specified that the Magazine of the Year was to be lauded not only for accomplishing its editorial mission but also for “support[ing] its brand.” In 2012, the NMA Call specified that the Magazine of the Year would “almost certainly demonstrate achievement on tablets and other emerging platforms.” By 2014, the Magazine of the Year category expanded to include the publication’s affiliated conferences, events, books, and radio and television programs. The 2015 call explained that a Magazine of the Year entry would consist of “content and products, including merchandise, that support the achievement of both editorial and publishing goals.” and that publications would “likely submit one or more brand extensions as part of their entry.”

Discussion

This study sought to document changes to National Magazine Award categories since the advent of digital media and consider how those changes have redefined excellence in digital media. Since NMA introduced the first digital category in 1998, much has changed. The limited digital categories of the early years echo the limited capabilities of the early consumer Internet and legacy media’s caution about this new platform. As early as 2000, Lisa Guidone suggested that the magazine industry see the Internet as an opportunity for growth:

As the Internet enters a more sophisticated stage, magazine publishers are being challenged to seek out new and creative ways to use this medium to its greatest potential, particularly in terms of advertising and circulation dollars.¹³

Though the Web and its audience expanded, the NMA categories did not: Prior to 2010, there were only three digital categories. (See Figure 1 for a complete list of digital-only awards.)

Figure 1. ASME Digital Categories and years of awards.

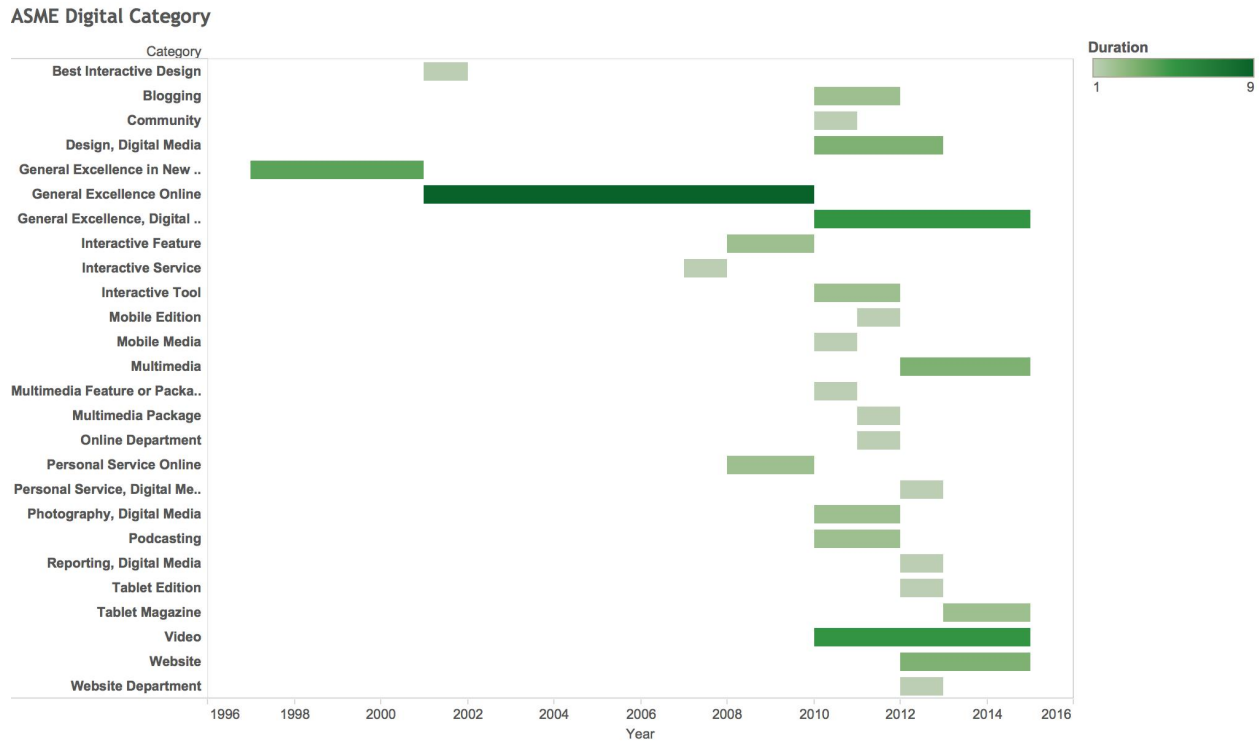


Figure 1. This figure illustrates the introduction of various digital-only awards categories and the award's duration.

In looking at the National Magazine Awards as an indicator of magazine industry changes, it is clear 2010 was a watershed year. For the first time, digital publications could compete with print publications in some writing categories. The number of digital categories quadrupled. These new digital categories helped expand the definition of excellence in magazine journalism and even redefined magazine journalism itself. Excellent magazine journalism could, as of 2010, be found in an online video or a podcast just as it could in a print magazine. The industry recognized the importance of social media, too, first with the Community category in 2010 and later in other categories that included social media in their criteria. The twelve digital awards conferred in 2010 may have been an overcorrection, however, as award categories combined and condensed in subsequent years. Category additions and subtractions also reflect new and changing technologies, such as the introduction of the Tablet category in 2012 and its suspension in 2016.¹⁴

The National Magazine Awards have long honored design as an important part of print magazines, and digital design is an equally valuable corollary. In addition to strong visuals, the category definitions indicate that functionality and usability must be considered when determining excellence. Print magazines convey their excellence through content and design. Digital magazines must also incorporate technology and interactivity to be considered worthy of a National Magazine Award.

Finally, the introduction of the Magazine of the Year category in 2010 can be seen as an indicator of the current state of the magazine industry. Successful magazines are no longer print-only but create and distribute content across multiple platforms and devices. Editorial content is not all that excellent magazines have to offer, either, according to the calls. Contemporary magazines are not just a title but a brand. These magazine brands may also have conferences and events and be affiliated with radio or television programs. The National Magazine Awards further recognize that magazines must survive in order to thrive and are therefore obligated to meet not only editorial standards but also business (“publishing”) goals. This is a significant shift for journalism, which traditionally prized the supposed line between editorial and advertising.¹⁵

Opportunities for Further Research

This exploratory study presents many opportunities for future research into how awards define excellence in magazine journalism. The present study was limited to lists of categories and calls for entries for the National Magazine Awards. Categories from other respected journalism awards that also honor magazines, such as the George Polk Awards or the recently expanded Pulitzer Prizes (2015), could also be analyzed in future studies. International magazine awards, such as those given in Canada or the United Kingdom, could also be analyzed for comparison.

A more rigorous textual analysis of the language used in the calls for entries could yield more definitive conclusions about how the magazine industry defines excellence. In addition, this research did not consider the winners for each category and therefore did not examine the accompanying citations. Citations could give future researchers insight into what exactly judges found exceptional in the submitted entries. If confidentiality rules permit, ASME judges themselves may provide a valuable research source, as they could recall discussions and deliberations about winning entries.

Conclusion

By examining the changes to National Magazine Award categories since the advent of digital media and considering how changes to those categories redefined excellence in magazine journalism, it is clear that the criteria by which magazine excellence is judged have expanded well beyond writing, reporting, and originality.¹⁶ New technology and media platforms create different standards of excellence than traditional print editorial content.

The introduction of a category like Magazine of the Year, which places equal value on a publication’s print and digital offerings, as well as expansions into other areas such as events, radio and television, and acknowledgment of a magazine’s financial success as a mark of excellence, expand on Blankenburg’s notion of prizes as a way to assess a publication’s caliber in the industry. These subtle changes in language suggest the magazine industry values fiscal solvency as much, or nearly as much, as traditional norms of excellence in editorial quality. Magazine brands are now, in part, as lauded for innovative revenue streams as for stunning design or transportive writing. This marks a sharp contrast to the days of the firewall between the editorial and business sides of magazines. The Magazine of the Year category codifies what the market demonstrates again and again: There can be no excellent magazines without extant magazines.

The National Magazine Awards will continue to adjust categories and criteria to reflect the shapeshifting industry they laud. These awards are ripe for further study, as they provide an annual check on the pulse of the magazine industry. For too long, scholars have overlooked this rich resource that has so much to tell us about magazine media.

Notes

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- ¹ MPA The Association of Magazine Media (2015). Magazine Media Factbook 2015.
- ² H. Allen White and Julie L. Andsager. "Winning Newspaper Pulitzer Prizes: The (Possible) Advantage of Being a Competitive Paper." *Journalism Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (1990): 912-919.
- ³ Gerda Gemser, Mark A.A.M. Leenders, and Nachoem M. Wijnberg. "Why Some Awards are More Effective Signals of Quality than Others: A Study of Movie Awards." *Journal of Management* 34, no. 1 (2008): 25-54.
- ⁴ Randal A. Beam, Sharon Dunwoody, and Gerald M. Kosicki. "The Relationship of Prize-Winning to Prestige and Job Satisfaction." *Journalism Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (1986): 693-699.
- ⁵ William B. Blankenburg, "How Editors Regard Contests." *APME News* 76, no. 1 (1974): 8-9.
- ⁶ David C. Coulson, David C. "Editors' Attitudes and Behavior Toward Journalism Awards." *Journalism Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (1989): 143-147.
- ⁷ Alicia C. Shepard, Alicia C. "Journalism's Prize Culture." *American Journalism Review* 22, no. 3 (2000): 22-22.
- ⁸ Ivor Shapiro, Patrizia Albanese, and Leigh Doyle. "What Makes Journalism "Excellent"? Criteria Identified by Hedges in Two Leading Awards Programs." *Canadian Journal of Communication* 31, no. 2 (2006).
- ⁹ Deni Elliott. "All is not Relative: Essential Shared Values and the Press." *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 3, no. 1 (1988): 28-32.
- ¹⁰ "Inside the Pulitzers." (1999). *Columbia Journalism Review*, 38(1), 26-27.
- ¹¹ MPA The Association of Magazine Media. Ellie Awards Winners and Finalists Database. <http://www.magazine.org/asme/national-magazine-awards/winners-finalists>. Although the ASME database is available online, researchers scraped and cleaned the data for better analysis.
- ¹² Sid Holt, Chief Executive of ASME, provided researchers with digital copies of calls for entries for the years 2007 to 2016. Researchers located printed copies of calls for entries from 1998 through 2006 in the ASME archives.
- ¹³ Lisa M. Guidone, "The Magazine at the Millennium: Integrating the Internet." *Publishing Research Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (2000), p. 22.
- ¹⁴ Aileen Gallagher, "2016: When Tablet Magazines Get to die." *Medium*, January 6, 2016. Accessed June 30, 2016, from <https://medium.com/@aegallagher/2016-when-tablet-magazines-get-to-die-81f9857f386c#.10pv1irwe>

11. ¹⁵ Nicholas Stein, “New Media, Old Values.” *Columbia Journalism Review* 38, no. 2 (1999):

¹⁶ cf. Shapiro, Albanese, and Doyle.