

## Parasocial Engagement and Starting a Corporate Family in *Ford Times*, 1908 to 1917

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### Abstract

This article tells the birth story of *Ford Times*, a company magazine created by the Ford Motor Company from 1908 to 1917 for dealers and consumers. The magazine detailed more than new models for sale: it combined narratives about automobile use, food, farming, rural life, nationhood, and family with the Ford brand in order to build a reader community, inspire bonds with corporate stakeholders, and strengthen loyalty to a brand that secured the automobile's place in American culture. Using the concept of parasocial engagement, this research examines how narratives circulated in *Ford Times* fostered connections with the company, fellow readers, and brand.

**Keywords:** parasocial engagement, public relations, corporate communication, magazines, community, history, Ford

### Introduction

Ford's 1908 decision to introduce the *Ford Times* company magazine was not revolutionary or an unusual move for a growing corporation. Its creation occurred amid a nationwide swell of public relations activity, strong growth in magazine circulation, and a period of reform and improvement in America. Executives and editorial staff wanted the magazine to foster feelings of community and dialogue, to inspire readers to improve moral and societal ills, and to improve the standardization of communication amid corporate maturity and growth.<sup>1</sup>

The Ford Motor Company envisioned their magazine as a "clearinghouse" where members of the Ford family could share information, values, and experience. Ford used the magazine first to build up brand tenets among an audience of dealers, many new to the budding company, and then to inform and inspire consumer audiences. Ford hoped the magazine would create a common culture, vision and values between the corporation, dealers and consumers. The magazine was wildly successful in bridging these stakeholders. Soon

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after its 1908 debut, the house organ had a wider circulation than any other auto manufacturer's magazine, and within a few years, readership grew to be the largest of any industrial publication in the United States. By March of 1917, *Ford Times* could claim circulation figures exceeding 900,000 readers. Although remarkably successful, *Ford Times* was not novel, for at least two other industry manufacturers issued similar house organs by the time of its debut.<sup>2</sup> The magazine—and Henry Ford—also inspired many customers to write detailed personal letters to the corporation. The Benson Ford Research Center in Dearborn, Michigan contains files of correspondence from Americans describing emotional ties to their cars, gratitude for company “gifts” like the corporate magazine, and their reactions to Henry Ford's statements, decisions or politics.

This article illustrates why *Ford Times* emerged when and where it did, and describes content and messages contained in early issues, focusing on the *Ford Times*' first issue in 1908 and ending with its 1917 suspension for the impending war. With the start of World War I, the successful magazine was shuttered and the *Ford Times* title remained dormant for more than 20 years. This article also describes how *Ford Times* pursued the following goals: it tried to meet informational needs, provide a narrative of connection, give readers a deeper sense of Ford brand tenets, and offer a moral base for car consumption. Using parasocial theory as a frame, this research discusses how magazines build a community of interest, encourage readers to develop one-sided relationships with corporations, and foster “intimacy at a distance.”<sup>3</sup>

## Literature Review

### Birth of a Corporate Soul

“The whole country seems to have gone automobile mad,” observed an official from the U.S. Patent Office in 1901.<sup>4</sup> It was only a slight exaggeration. Between 1900 and 1910, automobile manufacturers increased production from 4,000 to 187,000 vehicles, and Americans increased the number of motor vehicle registrations from 8,000 to 469,000.<sup>5</sup> The powerful impact of the automobile industry, and of Henry Ford specifically, is indisputable.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, Henry Ford set in action his simple but legendary plan: mass-produce a car for the “multitudes” and pay workers enough so they could afford to buy one. With the introduction of the Model T for \$850 in 1908, Ford was “selling not just a car but the dream of a better future to workers, farmers and others generally forgotten by the Automobile Age.”<sup>6</sup> In creating and selling a car that farmers and rural Americans could afford, “Henry Ford made American dreams come true” more than “any other inventor, artist, writer, or politician.”<sup>7</sup>

As the popularity of their products increased, corporations like the Ford Motor Company grew in size and power and threatened the balance between family, church, education, the press, government and work.<sup>8</sup> For the early twentieth century corporation

becoming an institution, Marchand writes, “meant more than simply acquiring the status of a customary, established entity. It meant rising above mere commercialism and removing the taint of selfishness.”<sup>9</sup> He continues, “In our more secular, less naïve contemporary world, we see such attempts to augment moral legitimacy as campaigns to gain corporate prestige or a reputation for social responsibility. But in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both advocates and critics of the giant corporations spoke of similar aspirations as quests for a ‘corporate soul.’”<sup>10</sup>

Corporations understood the importance of sharing information—and developing their ‘soul’—on their own terms, largely by playing journalist and producing media vehicles. Businesses of all types were searching for more formal and sophisticated communication tactics at the beginning of the twentieth century. Largely because of efforts by muckraking journalists, corporate communicators were expected to disclose activities and disseminate information to the public beyond product advertising.<sup>11</sup> Publicity, as corporate communication activities were referred to during this time, shifted from something given by newspapers to something provided by businesses and industries.<sup>12</sup> Both corporations and social reformers embraced organizational efforts to make information public. Political leaders even required it: “Theodore Roosevelt’s agitation for ‘corporate publicity,’ meaning mandated release of information from the trusts, was an important contributing factor in the timing of, as well as the motivation for, the rise of corporate publicity programs.”<sup>13</sup>

Starting a company magazine made sense to turn-of-the-century communicators. Printing, paper, and postal rates were cheap, and magazines geared towards middle and working class Americans proliferated.<sup>14</sup> By 1928, American companies were producing 700 to 800 corporate magazines, mostly geared towards employees.<sup>15</sup> By 1950, American businesses were circulating 70.7 million copies of house organs.<sup>16</sup> Magazines were a prime venue for communication between the company and employees, an effective tool to create goodwill among stakeholders, and a way to convince readers of the company’s benevolent nature as businesses expanded from small operations to sprawling, decentralized giants.<sup>17</sup> Despite the long history and proliferation of corporate magazines, there has been “little critical examination of this unique organizational medium.”<sup>18</sup> Mass communication scholars have overlooked corporate magazines as a cultural form, and company magazines are an underestimated and understudied form of communication.<sup>19</sup> Company-produced magazines have not received the academic attention they deserve, as scholars have not always treated consumption and commercial messages as serious objects of study important to American history and culture.<sup>20</sup> Even scholars specializing in public relations history have not fully investigated company magazines, despite the long-standing nature of tactics such as the company press. This is an important deficit, for as Nye writes, business history must be “more than the story of balance sheets, labor relations, successes and defeats in the marketplace, and inventions. To survive, a corporation must provide employees and customers with interpretations of the world. It must project not merely a good public image

but a construction of reality that organizes the dispersed facts of experience. This construction of social worlds was necessary for the functioning of large corporations.”<sup>21</sup>

This research on *Ford Times* is a unique opportunity to examine early corporate efforts to construct a social world and bonds of trust among consumers and employees. Unlike other early automotive industry publications, like *Automotive News*, *Horseless Age* and *Motor World*, *Ford Times* did not simply review products or focus on the automotive industry at large.<sup>22</sup> Unlike other automotive house organs of its time, *Ford Times* was designed to be valuable to internal brand stakeholders, dealers, and the general motoring public, and due to the long run of the publication and lasting success of the Ford Motor Company, it shaped corporate heritage and branding for more than a century. Scholarship on the company press often catalogs magazine titles, describes “typical” or “common” aspects of house organs or offers prescriptive “how-to” tips for public relations professionals and company editors.<sup>23</sup> Few scholars have examined corporate-created magazines as a nexus of community. This article adds to our understanding of how corporate magazines build relationships around particular product brands. The research below describes how the Ford Motor Company used language and images to tell their corporate story, to unite a community of consumers, and ultimately, to sell automobiles.

### **Intimacy at a Distance**

Building corporate souls and starting publicity programs that resonate requires organizations to develop relationships with the public and create kinship at a distance. Scholars have used the concept of parasocial engagement to describe one-sided relationships developed with a remote organization, program, or media persona.<sup>24</sup> Developed in both psychology and mass communication literature, the concept has been applied to examinations of relationships with media persona built through media exposure.<sup>25</sup> Attributes of parasocial interactions are similar to those of in-person relationships; viewers or readers react as if programs, organizations, or characters are part of their social network. Viewers feel they know characters like friends, and respond in kind, for example, by talking back to the program, writing letters to the organization, expressing feelings of closeness or concern, or by seeking personal contact with characters.<sup>26</sup> Scholars have found parasocial interactions are more likely to happen when certain programming conventions are present like close-ups of television characters’ faces or use of a conversational tone.<sup>27</sup>

Parasocial engagement, write Coombs and Holladay, might be a better model than interpersonal communication—or other theories of relationships—to understand organizational communication and public relations.<sup>28</sup> They write that parasocial interactions typically transpire through communication channels often managed by public relations practitioners, like websites or social media, and these relationships are more one-sided than mutual.<sup>29</sup>

Corporate magazines are ideal to study parasocial engagement. Like other fan-focused channels, company magazines actively seek to cultivate intimacy, increase trust, and often create an illusion of dialogue with consumers, in order to personify large corporations. Despite the relevance of parasocial theory to organizational communication, and magazines in particular, scholarship has not examined how particular company magazines might foster intimacy at a distance. The purpose of this research is to examine *Ford Times* content and narratives to examine how the corporate magazine built relationships with readers. Thus, overarching research questions in this study include: “What dominant narratives and themes are included in the *Ford Times*? How did editors use these narratives and themes to build community among readers, dealers and the growing corporation? How might *Ford Times* have fostered parasocial interactions?” The following section focuses on the approach used to answer these questions.

### Method

This article is a close examination of *Ford Times* content, articles, and archives during the publication’s early years, from 1908 to 1917. A constructed-year sample was used, which included four *Ford Times* issues from every third year of publication to ensure a mix of months, seasons, and years; this resulted in a final sample of approximately 15 issues of the magazine and over 200 articles. Besides the formal analysis of the *Ford Times* content, this research also included historical archive work at the Benson Ford Research Center in Dearborn, Michigan. Following processes for historical and qualitative textual analysis, the first stage of analysis included organizing and reading over the issues and articles until familiar with content, and then a textual analysis was conducted on magazine content.<sup>30</sup> Textual analysis focused on uncovering how magazine content “hung together,” connected to Ford’s brand image, and encouraged connections among readers.<sup>31</sup> The author identified common phrases, themes and frames, built dominant categories, and then checked prominent patterns across content.

Communication scholars often dismiss house organs like the *Ford Times* for their “trivial” content, namely articles that recognize and motivate employees, and focus on the “dreaded three Bs: bowling scores, birthdays, and babies.”<sup>32</sup> As this article illustrates, *Ford Times* did more than simply share personnel news or push messages about Ford products; it also provided a narrative of connection, met informational needs of audience members, gave readers a deeper sense of Ford brand tenets, and offered moral base for car consumption.

Before sharing findings, the historical context surrounding the birth of the magazine is described below.

#### Birth of the *Ford Times*

As growing corporations embraced the idea that they were accountable to the public and needed to operate in ways that benefited a common good, Gower writes, “successful

corporate public relations required more than the hiring of a press or publicity agent; it required a mature individual who understood the business and the public.”<sup>33</sup> For the Ford Motor Company, that individual was Norval A. Hawkins.

Norval A. Hawkins, the commercial manager of the Ford Company, created the first issue on April 15, 1908, to “afford a means for the interchange of ideas among employees of the Ford Motor Co.”<sup>34</sup> *Ford Times* was the brainchild of “perhaps the greatest salesman the world has ever known.”<sup>35</sup> Henry Ford and James Couzens hired Hawkins late in 1907 to manage sales and marketing.<sup>36</sup> Hawkins writes that he landed the position by “selling Henry Ford” on the idea that the company lacked certain services that he could provide.<sup>37</sup> He was responsible for “the distribution of products, advertising, collections, selection of branch managers and their corps of assistants, operation of branch houses, appointment and direction of agents, employment and control of the entire sales force, etc., etc.” In Hawkins’s own words, the position was “much broader than that of Sales Manager, as it included also the accounting and organizing of nearly every department of the business.”<sup>38</sup> Hawkins revolutionized the sales operations of the company by creating intensive territories for semi-independent dealers based on a branch management distribution system. Hawkins and Couzens revamped the sales organization by opening company branch agencies in major North American cities, which assembled cars to save on shipping costs, provided service and repairs for customers, and supported dealers.<sup>39</sup> By 1913, Hawkins’s sales network consisted of over 7,000 dealers and 32 branch offices throughout North America.<sup>40</sup>

Protecting ongoing relationships between the corporation and dealers, and in turn between dealers and customers, was vital; dealers were both partners and customers of the company. Like other automobile manufacturers, Ford did not sell directly to consumers but sold cars at a discount to dealers, approximately one-quarter the price of the car.<sup>41</sup> The company relied on its dealers and their sales teams to help generate demand among prospects, fight competition, send market information back to corporate headquarters, and respond to changes from Ford executives.<sup>42</sup> Ford also needed dealers to retain customers for repairs, and eventually, to purchase future models.

As partners, customers, stakeholders, and bridges to customers, dealers needed more than one-dimensional news, gossip, or personnel details; they needed engaging, motivational, informational and relevant stories. The company had to implement an efficient system to get information and enthusiasm flowing between dealers, consumers and the corporation; they had to motivate dealers to advocate on behalf of the corporation. Hawkins knew he had to first “weld together the geographically scattered Ford sales force,” retain dealers, standardize communication from the home office, and foster a common company culture.<sup>43</sup>

He found the answer in the creation of a house organ—the *Ford Times*.<sup>44</sup> The slick, 16-to-40-page magazine was initially targeted to dealers and branch managers and featured sales techniques, advertising advice, and tips on running an efficient business. In line with the era’s dedication to reform and improvement and Henry Ford’s image as folk hero, the

magazine also offered general moral guidance, motivational quotes, and company history. Its focus was three-fold: information, inspiration and instruction. Articles reported the results of car races and stunts, personnel news, changes in design, tips on car maintenance, and industry news.

In a 1927 *Detroit News* article, Hawkins described the *Ford Times* as “the largest house organ in the world. Cyrus H.K. Curtis said once we should take over the *Saturday Evening Post* and use it for a house organ.”<sup>45</sup> Hawkins enlisted H.B. Harper, who was Ford Motor Company’s advertising manager from 1908 to 1910, and his assistant to write most of the initial copy. Other executives besides Hawkins, including Vice President James Couzens and Henry Ford, also contributed a significant amount of early content.

After editor Harper was promoted to export manager and Hawkins’s responsibilities expanded, Ford Motor Company’s advertising staff took control of the magazine and initiated significant changes in magazine content and distribution.<sup>46</sup> In September of 1910, the company expanded readership to include Ford owners and prospective customers.<sup>47</sup> The company started sending copies of the magazine to dealers, based on the number of cars they sold; dealers forwarded *Ford Times* on to purchasers of Ford vehicles.<sup>48</sup>

The advertising staff members and agencies preparing most issues also enlarged the publication, produced it monthly rather than semimonthly, printed covers in four colors, and began to accept advertising from car accessory makers.<sup>49</sup> Content slowly began to focus less on sales techniques and staff members accepted more articles written by experts outside of the organization. Travel information began to appear in the magazine, as did articles describing “Owners Experiences,” mechanical advice to drivers, and pieces advocating for the “Good Roads” movement.<sup>50</sup> By December 1913, editors were dedicating the house organ to external rather than internal stakeholders. Editors promised, “*Ford Times* is a magazine devoted to the automobile public in general—and to Ford owners in particular. But somewhere between its covers will be found something of interest to everyone.”<sup>51</sup>

## Findings

### Interactive Orientation

Unlike advertising copy or traditional newspaper articles, the *Ford Times* had a cocreational orientation; the magazine wanted to partner with dealers to produce magazine content that would be relevant to the reader community. From the inaugural issue, editorial staff made it clear that the *Ford Times*’ purpose was to facilitate conversation; magazine content was the joint responsibility of the company and readers. Harper and Hawkins pressed dealers to contribute material and serve as correspondents by reporting on the sales environment of their particular region. *Ford Times* staff members positioned the magazine as a substitute for face-to-face dialogue. Editors invited readers to share in the creation of brand stories circulated between the corporation, dealers and customers.

The magazine's masthead declared that *Ford Times* was "published solely to afford a means for the interchange of ideas among all dealers and employees of the Ford Motor Co, Detroit."<sup>52</sup> Editors told readers, "anything that advances the interests of the Ford Motor Company is wanted for this paper, and by all contributing we can make the *FORD TIMES* very valuable."<sup>53</sup> In the September 1908 issue, editors write that they "want to make the *Ford Times* a Clearing House of ideas, selling methods, sales takes, etc, and our only intent is thereby to increase the effectiveness of our entire organization."<sup>54</sup>

Dealers were encouraged to submit content and take an active role with the magazine in order to help themselves and fellow dealers. Dealers were encouraged to "tell us how you work; what makes sales for you; how you overcome competition; what your strongest talking points are; what your customers admire in Ford cars; how you get close to potential buyers; how you take care of repairs; and so give us your experience in exchange for the experience of other dealers."<sup>55</sup> Dealers did respond to these calls for content. For example, in the September 1, 1908, issue, C.F. Weeber of Albany, N.Y. gives other dealers tips on how to secure prospects, namely by encouraging customers to keep up with their neighbors, competitors, and friends who are Ford owners. Dealers from Oklahoma and Wisconsin shared letters that they mailed to lists of potential Ford customers in hopes that their tactics would be "valuable to other dealers."<sup>56</sup> Numerous photographs, news briefs, selling tips and techniques, quotes and quips appear in the first two years, attributed to dealers.

Editors did not change the co-creational orientation of the company magazine when the focus turned to consumers. Readers were still invited to "help edit the magazine" in order to make it more relevant. Editors write: "It is our intention to make *Ford Times* even more of a real magazine of interest to its readers than it has been in the past. We want you to look forward to the coming of *Ford Times* with the same anticipation you do the arrival of your other favorite periodicals, and we want you to get it the first of each month. We want *Ford Times* readers to help us edit the magazine so that it shall contain exactly what they want."

As in earlier issues that appealed to dealers for content, editors issued similar calls to readers. In the January 1914 issue after appealing again to the community for contributions, "*Ford Times*, while published by the Ford Motor Company, belongs to Ford owners. It wants to tell the things in which Ford owners are interested. If your Ford has accomplished a feat which you want to talk about to other Ford owners, send the story to *Ford Times*. *Ford Times* will publish just as much of this news as its forty-eight pages can contain. *Ford Times* isn't a one-man proposition. It takes many contributors to make a good magazine."<sup>57</sup>

*Ford Times* created the vision that the corporation serves the community of readers, and editors were merely "a clearinghouse" for employee and consumer concerns.<sup>58</sup> By collaborating with readers to develop content for the magazine, *Ford Times* invited consumers to join dealers in articulating and representing corporate identity and culture. This helped foster connections with the magazine and potentially made possible one dimension of parasocial engagement. Other scholars have illustrated that behavioral

interactions, or the degree to which audience members have the opportunity to react to a program—including give feedback, talk about content with others, or have discussions with organizations—is an important part of parasocial relationships.<sup>59</sup> Critical involvement, or the degree to which audiences engage in the construction of a media message, is also important.<sup>60</sup> By positioning the magazine as an interactive, co-created clearinghouse that depended upon audience member's participation and assistance, *Ford Times* invited audience members' active participation in the building of brand narratives and development of a corporate soul, and in turn, encouraged audience members to personally invest in magazine content.

### The Ford Family

Like many other company magazines directed to employees, articles relied on a “family” metaphor to unite readers. The “corporation as family” metaphor was pervasive in communication directed to factory workers in the first part of the twentieth century to ease labor problems, counter unionization movements, and implement corporate welfare programs.<sup>61</sup> As Mandell writes, this metaphor allowed corporate executives to assume the role of “corporate benefactor” rather than “ruthless or uncaring exploiter” and ask for loyalty, cooperation and hard work from laborers. Familial terminology reminded workers that everyone within the corporation had distinct, complementary roles. Workers must stick with the company in good and bad times and repay employers with cooperation and gratitude.<sup>62</sup>

Employee news, major sales by top dealers, visits or “vacations” to the factory by dealers and their teams, and general reports on business from different areas of the country—some of it similar to content in other house organs of the period—appeared in early issues.<sup>63</sup> The magazine ran extended personnel announcements and profiles of individual dealers, branch managers and executives that casually introduced members of the Ford family to one another, demonstrated the success of those associated with the company, and reinforced Ford company values. For example, the August 1, 1908 issue profiles branch manager “Warren C. or better known by most of his friends as ‘Fuzzy’” under the title “Who is St. Louis?” The light-hearted article describes Anderson's confident spirit, largely boosted by his successful work to build personal contact with all Ford car owners in and about St. Louis, and encourages all readers to write to “Fuzzy” to get to know him and his associates better. The convention of branch managers was described as “the annual Ford family reunion”: “it was a season of family job participated in, in the largest measure, by every member of the Ford family.”<sup>64</sup>

*Ford Times* also encouraged dealers to treat customers as family and focus on building long-term relationships with prospects: “Too much emphasis cannot be laid on the fact that when you have sold a car to a customer your acquaintance and business relations with that customer have only just commenced—not ended.”<sup>65</sup> The magazine gave specific tips to dealers on how to build this relationship, most notably, in developing owners' clubs. The first was organized in St. Louis when some “red hot enthusiasts” approached a local branch dealer to suggest forming a club of local Ford owners. The St. Louis branch manager invited

all Ford owners in the city to be his guests at the Meramee Highlands resort. 110 people showed up. The magazine suggested that forming Ford owner clubs is a good idea for “it promotes sociability among members, boosts the automobile industry generally, assists in Ford sales in particular.” The company promised to design an emblem for club members’ radiators, so members can identify one another.<sup>66</sup> Magazine editors also offered to be a connection among dealers interested in starting such clubs: “The Times will be pleased to hear of the starting of similar clubs and will be glad to offer suggestions if called upon for them.” The magazine also reported other ritual activities that dealers created and readers participated in with their Ford cars. The article “Ford Day in Wisconsin” describes how “Fordites” in Wisconsin decided to hold an event that would bring business to Milwaukee while “promoting greater sociability among the army of Ford owners.”

Owners also submitted content that echoed the place of Ford within their family. In the article, “Ford is Indispensable” a New York owner wrote to the magazine to share what his Ford car meant to him: “I thought my happiness was complete when my baby boy came ten weeks ago. The Ford has brought outings to him and pleasures to his mother and to me that, much as we had driven with friends, we never knew till we had made a Ford car a member of the family.”<sup>67</sup> In quote box: “How many are there in the family? Three –two persons and a Ford.”<sup>68</sup>

The family metaphor, stories of owner’s clubs, and development of common history and experiences also made possible dimensions of parasocial engagement. Scholars have described how important referential involvement is to the development of parasocial relationships.<sup>69</sup> Referential involvement is the degree to which audience members can relate messages to their own experiences.<sup>70</sup> *Ford Times* narratives fostered referential involvement by connecting magazine content to shared history, mutual relationships, and common experiences.

### **A Virtuous Drive**

Once the magazine focused on consumer audiences, editors described the company mission—to sell automobiles—as a moral crusade. Instead of just a route to profits, buying and selling autos became a means to create brotherhood, spread democracy, improve humanity, and protect the moral code uniting the nation.<sup>71</sup> Feature articles described the role of the car in American life, where product ownership united those divided by geography, class, and generation. In the introduction to the June 1913 issue, the editors write, “Whiz! Whiz! Whiz! A merry throng is passing. Bankers and lawyers, merchants and farmers, city dwellers and country lovers! Here is a new democracy.”<sup>72</sup>

The automobile was also constructed as a connection between community members, especially rural farmers and their families. The May 1914 issue states: “Ask anyone to name the two things that have done the most to make the life of the farmer more worth living, and almost without exception the answer will be, the telephone and the automobile. The

telephone linked neighbors, joined villages, and revolutionized methods of carrying on the business of the farm. It knocked off the shackles of isolation that held the average farm family from the outside world; it made possible the interchange of ideas between neighbors, it permitted the voice to go visiting. But the automobile went a step further... The automobile did for the body what the telephone had done for the voice. With the automobile the farmer and his family not only can talk with friends and neighbors with comparative ease, but they can actually visit friends and neighbors from whom they had hitherto been separated by impossible distances."<sup>73</sup> The car made the farmer "truly the most independent member of the nation-family." If the farmer benefits, all Americans benefit: "The more prosperity to the farmer, the more prosperity to the whole nation."<sup>74</sup>

Auto purchases would allow Americans to travel and to build connections among themselves. Editors write, "Consequently we find the man from the coal breakers and the man from Wall Street pulling together in double harness for the common good—for the automobile has made them brothers. Truly, it is an age of understanding—of mental broadening—and of automobiling."<sup>75</sup>

*Ford Times* offered a vision of America in which cars created community and ownership was an ethical, principled activity. Parasocial engagement scholars have pointed to the importance of affective interaction, or the ability of audience members to know characters or organizations as they know their friends, to identify with them and to believe that their interests are connected.<sup>76</sup> *Ford Times* framed a vision in which audience members could know the corporation shared their values and offered a collective moral mission, in which brotherhood and connection could be built on the Ford brand.

### Conclusion

This article illustrates that the *Ford Times* was about more than the selling of cars. *Ford Times* constructed community, reinforced certain ways of thinking, worked as a branding tool, and offered content that far surpassed product features. The magazine provided consumers and dealers with a narrative of connection, content that informed, a guide for the reader community, and a moral base for car consumption.

This work made *Ford Times* a successful house organ for the company. *Ford Times* became an instrumental tool in company press relations and a source of company news for other media outlets; it was sent to newspapers and quoted by journalists. Hawkins reprinted articles as press releases and sent these to dealers and branch managers to forward to their local newspapers.<sup>77</sup> With the magazine's help, dealers used the articles to standardize advertising, encourage participation in consumer clubs and events, and spread company brand tenets.

Despite this success, the Ford Motor Company silenced the *Ford Times* house organ in April with the United States' 1917 entry into World War I. Lewis writes, "Undoubtedly,

the firm assumed—correctly as it turned out—that it would have to devote much of its productive capacity to military needs for the duration of the war.”<sup>78</sup> Although the company discontinued the *Ford Times* magazine, the company presses did not lay idle for long. As prominent newspaper journalists of the interwar period captured momentous events—“Armistice Signed, End of the War!” (New York Times, November 11, 1918), “Suffrage Wins in Senate; Now Goes to States,” (New York Times, June 5, 1919), “Lindbergh Does it!” (New York Times, May 21, 1927), “Wall Street Lays an Egg” (Variety, October 30, 1929) and “War: Declared on Japan by US” (Honolulu Star Bulletin, December 8, 1941)—so did the Ford Motor Company. Henry Ford devoted an astonishing amount of resources to company publications between the wars, and in 1943, added yet another publication to its portfolio: a revived *Ford Times*.

Magazines more than any other media form are a “full of stories which we tell about ourselves, which we make up about ourselves, which we accept as being about ourselves.”<sup>79</sup> In order to foster a group of readers into a successful magazine community, Holmes writes that editors target a specific group of readers, tailor content to their “needs, desires, hopes, and fears,” create a bond of trust, encourage community-like interactions among readers and editors, and respond in a fluid manner to larger cultural shifts and changes.<sup>80</sup> The reader community and editors together construct what ‘counts’ as news. Magazine exceptionalism, argues David Abrahamson, allows this media form to create a common community of interest between writers and readers, a community of interest that leads to action or “allows readers to do something” with the information being provided.<sup>81</sup> Using parasocial theory as guide, this article demonstrates how readers and the Ford Motor Company used their magazine to foster intimacy at a distance.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert L. Heath, Elizabeth L. Toth, and Damion Waymer, *Rhetorical and Critical Approaches to Public Relations II* (Routledge, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> The Olds Motor Works and the Winton Motor Carriage Company offered the motor industry's first house organs at the turn of the century. David L. Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford: An American Folk Hero and His Company* (Wayne State University Press, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl, "Mass Communication and Para-social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance," *Psychiatry* 19, no. 3 (1956).

<sup>4</sup> Edwin Emerson Jr., "Automobiles Today," *Ainslee's Magazine*, April 1901.

<sup>5</sup> John B. Rae, *The American Automobile: A Brief History* (University of Chicago Press, 1965), 33.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>7</sup> Jack Beatty, *Colossus: How the Corporation Changed America* (Broadway Books, 2001), 257.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Kevin Stoker and Brad L. Rawlins, "The Light of Publicity in the Progressive Era: From Searchlight to Flashlight," *Journalism History* 30, no. 4 (2005).

<sup>12</sup> Russell and Bishop make this argument by examining newspaper and magazines writer's definitions of publicity and press agency from 1865 to 1904. Karen M. Russell and Carl O. Bishop, "Understanding Ivy Lee's Declaration of Principles: U.S. Newspaper and Magazine Coverage of Publicity and Press Agency, 1865-1904," *Public Relations Review* 35, no. 2 (2009).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Frank L. Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1741-1930*, vol. 5 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958-1968).

<sup>15</sup> P.M. Wagner, *Factory and Industrial Management*, 1928.

<sup>16</sup> Abigail F. Hausdorfer, *House Organ Production: A Bibliography* (Temple University Libraries, 1954).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid; JoAnne Yates, *Control through Communication: The Rise of System in American Management*; David E. Nye, *Image Worlds: Corporate Identities at General Electric, 1890-1930*; William J. Cadigan, *The Icie File: A History of Industrial Journalism* (International Council of Industrial Editors, 1961); Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul*; Sam Riley, *Corporate Magazines of the United States* (Greenwood Pub Group, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> Phillip G. Clampitt, Jean M. Crevcoure, and Robin L. Hartel, "Exploratory Research on Employee Publications," *International Journal of Business Communication* 23, no. 3 (1986): 5.

<sup>19</sup> Tim Holmes, "Mapping the Magazine: An Introduction," *Journalism Studies* 8, no. 4 (2007); D. Jameson, "Book Review: Corporate Magazines of the United States," *International Journal of Business Communication* 31 (1994); Riley, *Corporate Magazines of the United States*.

<sup>20</sup> Lawrence B. Glickman, *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader* (Cornell University Press, 1999), 7.

<sup>21</sup> Nye, *Image Worlds: Corporate Identities at General Electric, 1890-1930*.

<sup>22</sup> Kathleen Endres, *Trade, Industrial, and Professional Periodicals of the United States* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> Nye, *Image Worlds: Corporate Identities at General Electric, 1890-1930*.

<sup>24</sup> Horton and Wohl, "Mass Communication and Para-social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance"; David Giles, "Parasocial Interaction: A Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research," *Media Psychology* 4 (2002).

<sup>25</sup> W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry Holladay, "Public Relations' 'Relationship Identity' in Research: Enlightenment or Illusion," *PR Review* 41 (2015); Giles, "Parasocial Interaction: A Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research."

<sup>26</sup> Giles, "Parasocial Interaction: A Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research."

<sup>27</sup> Suruchi Sood and Everett Rogers, "Dimensions of Parasocial Interaction by Letter-Writers to a Popular Entertainment-Education Soap Opera in India," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 44, no. 3 (2000).

<sup>28</sup> Coombs and Holladay, "Public Relations' 'Relationship Identity' in Research: Enlightenment or Illusion."

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Roger Wimmer and Joseph Dominick, *Mass Media Research: An Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Thomson, 2011); Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985).

<sup>31</sup> As P.Larsen writes, analysts of text seek to “bring out the whole range of possible meanings” within a text. Meaning is an “indeterminate field” in which “intentions and possible effects intersect.” Klaus B. Jensen and Nicholas Jankowski, *A Handbook of Qualitative Methodologies for Mass Communication Research* (Routledge, 1991), 122.

<sup>32</sup> Clampitt, Crevcoure, and Hartel, “Exploratory Research on Employee Publications.”

<sup>33</sup> Karla Gower, “US Corporate Public Relations in the Progressive Era.”

<sup>34</sup> *Ford Times*, April 15, 1908, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Allan Nevins and Frank Hill, *Ford: The Times, the Man, the Company*, 342-43.

<sup>36</sup> Nevins and Hill, *Ford: The Times, the Man, the Company*.

<sup>37</sup> In his book published after working at the FMC, Hawkins writes that his work as a public accountant for Ford revealed that the company needed a commercial manager and sales organizer. He convinced Ford to hire him, even though he did not have experience handling sales agents and dealers, by presenting his ideas on how the job should be done. Norval A. Hawkins, *Certain Success* (1920).

<sup>38</sup> Hawkins claims that during the twelve years he spent in charge of marketing the Ford Company’s sales increased 132 times—from 6181 to 815912 cars per year. Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> James M. Rubenstein, *Making and Selling Cars: Innovation and Change in the US Automotive Industry* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Leslie Allen, “Rise and Fall of Ford's Sales Network Architect: Prison, Success, Bankruptcy,” *Automotive News* (2006).

<sup>40</sup> Steven Watts, *The People’s Tycoon: Henry Ford and the American Century*, 129.

<sup>41</sup> Walter Friedman, *Birth of a Salesman: The Transformation of Selling in America*, 211.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas S. Dicke, *Franchising in America: The Development of a Business Method, 1840-1980* (University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Friedman, *Birth of a Salesman: The Transformation of Selling in America*, 209-10.

<sup>43</sup> Dicke, *Franchising in America: The Development of a Business Method, 1840-1980*; Watts, *The People’s Tycoon: Henry Ford and the American Century*.

<sup>44</sup> Watts, *The People's Tycoon: Henry Ford and the American Century*; Friedman, *Birth of a Salesman: The Transformation of Selling in America*, 211.

<sup>45</sup> *Detroit News*, February 2, 1927.

<sup>46</sup> After spending two years as advertising manager and assistant commercial manager, H.B. Harper was promoted to export manager. "In the Realm of the Makers," *Automotive Industries* (1910). Harper left Ford to join the Willys-Overland company in February of 1911. *Ford Times*, February 1911, 179. Glen Buck was in charge of both advertising and editing the magazine in 1912 and 1913.

<sup>47</sup> In the article titled "Cooperation between Dealer & Factory," the Commercial Manager lists all the good things the company does for dealers, including "publish a House Organ—*Ford Times*—which is being sent to all dealers and will hereafter be mailed also occasionally to owners and prospects." *Ford Times*, September 1910, 14.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> The magazine switched from a semi-monthly to a monthly format in January 1911, as mentioned above. Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford: An American Folk Hero and His Company*, 49.

<sup>50</sup> "Good Roads" was an ongoing column in the *Ford Times*; it was also a nationwide movement to increase education and access to improved road conditions, especially in rural areas. The Good Roads movement was started by bicycle riders and manufacturers and taken up by automobile makers, drivers, and legislators. For more on the Good Roads league see William C. Hilles, *The Good Roads Movement in the United States: 1880-1916* (Duke University, 1958). For a good discussion of the need for campaigns to frame roads as a "technological" phenomenon that needed engineering for social ends rather than a "natural" phenomenon in order to gain the support of rural farmers, a frame that benefitted automobile manufacturers like Ford, see Christopher W. Wells, "The Changing Nature of Country Roads: Farmers, Reformers, and the Shifting Uses of Rural Space, 1880-1905," *Agricultural History* 80, no. 2 (2006).

<sup>51</sup> *Ford Times*, December 1913, back cover.

<sup>52</sup> This masthead ran from April 15, 1908, until February 1, 1909. In February, editors dropped the mission statement from the cover of the magazine. In October 1911, the slogan "*Ford Times*, Evidence that *Ford Times* are the Best Times," appeared on the first page of the magazine.

<sup>53</sup> *Ford Times*, July 1, 1908, 8.

<sup>54</sup> *Ford Times*, September 1, 1908, 11.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> *Ford Times*, November 1, 1908, 15; *Ford Times*, November 15, 1908, 10.

<sup>57</sup> *Ford Times*, January 1914, 147.

<sup>58</sup> Sheila Webb discusses this editorial tactic in her examination of the Reiman publications. Sheila Webb, "The Narrative Core of Traditional Values in Reiman Magazines," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 83, no. 4.

<sup>59</sup> Sood and Rogers, "Dimensions of Parasocial Interaction by Letter-Writers to a Popular Entertainment-Education Soap Opera in India."

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.; Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz, "Patterns of Involvement in Television Fiction: A Comparative Analysis," *European Journal of Communication* 1, (1986).

<sup>61</sup> Nikki Mandell, *The Corporation as Family: The Gendering of Corporate Welfare, 1890-1930* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>63</sup> For a discussion of traditional "employee news" of the time see Clampitt, Crevcoure, and Hartel, "Exploratory Research on Employee Publications."

<sup>64</sup> *Ford Times*, October 1911, 22.

<sup>65</sup> *Ford Times*, May 15, 1908, 5.

<sup>66</sup> *Ford Times*, July 1, 1908, 33.

<sup>67</sup> *Ford Times*, August-September June 1914, 515.

<sup>68</sup> *Ford Times*, January 1914, 181.

<sup>69</sup> Sood and Rogers, "Dimensions of Parasocial Interaction by Letter-Writers to a Popular Entertainment-Education Soap Opera in India"; Liebes and Katz, "Patterns of Involvement in Television Fiction: A Comparative Analysis."

<sup>70</sup> Sood and Rogers, "Dimensions of Parasocial Interaction by Letter-Writers to a Popular Entertainment-Education Soap Opera in India."

<sup>71</sup> Consumption of cars was, at times, also portrayed as a "moral" crusade before 1910. For example, the October 15, 1908 issue tells salesmen that Ford's Model T is "really the one chance for the man of moderate means to buy a high grade car. It places within the reach of thousands a better car than they ever hoped to own."

<sup>72</sup> *Ford Times*, June 11, 1913, 361.

<sup>73</sup> *Ford Times*, May 1914, 338.

<sup>74</sup> *Ford Times*, May 1914, 339.

<sup>75</sup> *Ford Times*, February 1914, 194.

<sup>76</sup> Sood and Rogers, “Dimensions of Parasocial Interaction by Letter-Writers to a Popular Entertainment-Education Soap Opera in India.”

<sup>77</sup> Although Hawkins, branch managers and dealers sent the *Ford Times* to newspaper journalists the extent to which stories were picked up is unclear.

<sup>78</sup> Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford: An American Folk Hero and His Company*, 496.

<sup>79</sup> Holmes, “Mapping the Magazine,” 515.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> David Abrahamson, “Magazine Exceptionalism.”