

## **Media Education Journal – Autumn/Winter 2004/5**

### **'Invisible Journalists' by Jenny McKay, University of Stirling**

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If you go into a newsagent to buy a magazine you're likely to find around 450 titles to choose from. If you shop at one of the bigger supermarkets there might even be as many as 800. Yet this still represents only a small selection of the total number of magazines published in the UK. That figure is about 8,500 and can't be precise because every year another 500 or so titles are launched. Some disappear too but the fact is that the UK has a large and lively periodicals industry publishing a huge range of titles to expanding audiences at home and abroad. These audiences tend to trust what they read in their magazines more than they trust their newspapers. Millions of magazines are sold weekly and almost everyone reads or buys one, or more likely several, at least on an occasional basis.

This year saw the birth of two magazines which additionally represent the birth of a sector. Zoo and Nuts have found their young male readers and look set to thrive thanks, partly, to their multi-million pound launch budgets (£8.5m and £8m respectively) but also to the skill of their publishers in manipulating consumers into changing their behaviour. So now the UK has a men's weekly magazine market that didn't exist before, and that is 'bursting with potential' according to Sylvia Auton, chief executive of IPC Media which publishes Nuts.

There simply is no equivalent level of innovation in the newspaper industry. It gets excited when a paper changes its owner or its size but rarely sees new titles. When newspapers modernise they tend to learn from magazines. They spawn magazine supplements and they develop their editorial content by including more features material. Yes, they look at the web too but for most print titles, whether newspapers or magazines, the web is an extension of the print brand so this has to be successful first or the website is unlikely to thrive.

As an industry the magazine sector is big. It's worth £7bn<sup>1</sup> in the UK and has seen huge expansion over the past 12 years, says Eric Verdon-Roe chief executive of Haymarket Publishing Group. He emphasises the global reach of the UK's industry. His own company has moved, in six years, from having no international editions of its publications to having 57 by May 2004. A further example is The Economist Group which now does 80 per cent of its business outside the UK.<sup>2</sup> The magazine industry has long been a pioneer in exploring the possibilities of media globalization, from Time and Reader's Digest through Vogue and Cosmopolitan, Hello! and Elle to such home-grown products as The Big Issue and FHM. The range and complexity of international licensing and publishing deals based on UK titles is rapidly increasing, with the markets in India, China, South Africa and Brazil coming under scrutiny. The Periodical Publishers Association, the industry's trade association, is now working on a research study of the Chinese market and was due to send a delegation to China this summer.<sup>3</sup>

More journalists work for magazines than newspapers in the UK. Career prospects are good, career development and training much more systematic and professional than in many, if not most, newspaper organizations, and salaries, particularly at the entry and middle level, considerably better. As delegates heard at Magazines 2004, the industry's trade organization get-together, there are now people keen to move from national daily papers to business-to-business (B2B) publications, something that would have been rare in the past.

It is in this B2B or trade or professional sector that many of the less well-known titles hide. They account for around 5000 of the UK's 8500 or so magazines and some of them have an influence much larger than their modest circulations might suggest. For example research conducted on behalf of the PPA showed that 87 per cent of decision-makers use the B2B press regularly and that for many people it provides the main way of keeping up to date with their industry. The

reason these titles are somewhat hidden is that most of us see only those which relate to our own work (UK Press Gazette, THES, Broadcast for me) or which the panelists on BBC television's Have I Got News For You make fun of. Many of these publications are sold on subscription or supplied by mail. Few have any news-stand presence. Yet they are a key part of the periodicals publishing industry, providing many entrants to journalism with a sound start in careers that may later move between the various media.

The same is true of the growing contract publishing industry where publishing houses produce magazines for other organizations as various as supermarkets, airlines and insurance companies who send them to their employees or give them to customers.

Why is it, then, that magazine journalism and the magazine industry attract so little attention from outside? Universities, colleges and even schools now regularly teach courses which include journalism whether as a training in how to do journalism, for those who want careers as journalists, or as a field of study and intellectual inquiry in its own right. Yet newspapers and broadcast news are invariably the focus of attention. It's almost as if magazines didn't exist in the eyes of academic and journalist media commentators. Even more surprisingly, those who train journalists in colleges and universities tend to ignore the periodicals sector too.

If you look at some of the standard books on journalism written for university students of journalism practice and the sociology of journalism you'll quickly find that magazines and their journalists are more or less absent. For example,

\* Sociologist Brian McNair's book News and Journalism in the UK, is widely used by students of journalism and media studies. First published in 1992, and reprinted several times since, it is typical. It doesn't have entries for magazines or periodicals in its index although it does mention a few individual titles. In fact

there is a section of the book about magazines – but it stretches to just 1.5 pages out of 212. McNair is dismissive of magazines, implying, as do several academics who study journalism as sociologists or cultural theorists, that the only journalism which matters is produced on the news pages of national newspapers, while possibly allowing a little credit to publications such as Private Eye and The Economist for the simple reason that they include hard news. Even if this ever was a credible position, it is hopelessly out of date, as Peter Preston, former editor of The Guardian, has publicly explained: most successful UK newspapers in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century are successful precisely because of what they have learned from magazines.<sup>4</sup>

\* In their book, A Journalism Reader, Michael Bromley and Tom O'Malley promise 'a comprehensive collection of essential writings on journalism history and practice from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day'. It is, indeed, a valuable collection, yet neither the contents list nor the index reveal any interest in periodicals, magazines or the magazine industry.

\* Tony Harcup's Journalism: Principles and Practice, published this year, is approachable and informative about newspaper practice but its claims are much wider. The blurb says it 'will be essential reading for all students of journalism and aspiring practitioners', because it offers 'a wide-ranging introduction to journalism and combines the experience and advice of practising journalists with insights gained by the academic study of journalism.' Yet the book's index makes no mention of magazines or periodicals and its single reference to the Periodicals Training Council amounts to no more than a name check. Some individual titles are mentioned in the index: nine in total, two of which were published in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The bibliography contains almost no references of use to students who might be interested in magazine journalism, whether as a career or as a topic of academic research. None of this is particularly surprising though even Harcup has to concede that magazines have their uses. In his chapter on interviewing he

notes among the sources of information that would be worth consulting during the preparation stage 'specialist magazines'.

He's right. Consumer magazines as well as trade or B2B magazines are staffed by people with specialist knowledge. Even if they don't have it before they arrive they develop it as part of the job. For many journalists this is one attraction of working in the magazine industry whether on consumer or trade titles. The expertise may be about professional issues (hospital medicine, window installation, trucking) or consumer and entertainment topics (the royal family, the leisure interests of young men, wedding etiquette). Newspapers and broadcasting organizations draw on this expertise all the time. Journalists on Flight International, for example, were in constant demand for several months after the air attack on the twin towers in New York. They gave about a hundred interviews within two days, its editor Murdo Morrison explained at Magazines 2004. He added that the average in a normal week was about 12 interviews, showing that there is always a need for this kind of expert knowledge. The same gathering heard from Stephanie Hawthorne of Pensions World that there was now considerable demand from news organizations for her to contribute to stories about the pensions crisis. In B2B publishing 'you are the expert even if you've only been there six months,' she said. At the frothier end of the periodicals spectrum editors of lifestyle publications such as Martin Daubney of loaded or Celia Duncan of CosmoGIRL are likely to be called on for information about, and comments on, their target readers and how they live their lives.

Magazines have their uses in other ways too -- as agenda setters. In areas such as medicine the journals The Lancet or BMJ are regularly the sources of news for many other media. In the entertainment and lifestyle fields the same thing happens. For the past 30 years at least, newspaper journalists have been dependent on music magazines ranging from NME to Mixmag for their understanding of musical trends.

From this it should be clear that for some aspiring journalists the magazine world is more appealing than the generalist world of hard news. Newspapers do employ specialist reporters but rarely enough to cover every eventuality and in any case they're likely to recruit from the specialist press. To take just two examples from my own teaching experience: one student who joined The Banker after a postgraduate journalism diploma was poached by the business section of a national newspaper within a year; another worked for Building Design before finding herself as the property correspondent for a Sunday newspaper. Both these moves were much more rapid than would have been likely had they taken the local weekly or even daily regional newspaper route so often still urged as the norm for new journalists.

I don't want to imply that their careers were successful *because* they ended up working for newspapers. That would be to fall into the Brian McNair misunderstanding, although if you do choose success in hard news as a measure then there are plenty of examples of important stories emerging from magazine newsrooms. Investigative journalist Paul Foot, who died as this article was in preparation, published many of his important exposés in Private Eye. New Internationalist regularly covers international stories that other publications can't or won't find space for. When I joined a magazine company (Condé Nast) after a graduate training scheme on a regional daily paper, I was given far more responsibility than I would have had for several years on the paper, not to mention double the salary, the promise of further training opportunities and manageable working hours. Careers in magazines can be highly satisfying in their own right whether or not hard-news reporting is the aim.

Yet the story of invisibility continues if you look through a list of university courses which cover journalism. There are comparatively few which make any attempt to look at magazines and there is no course with accreditation from the Periodicals Training Council north of Watford – or of University of Westminster's Harrow campus near Watford to be precise.

The National Council for the Training of Journalists, which runs its own training courses as well as accrediting some of those run by colleges and universities, does now include magazine journalism under its umbrella but this is a recent development (and may have something to do with the fact that its new chief executive ran the Periodicals Training Council for several years). For decades the NCTJ considered only newspaper reporting and subediting to be its responsibility, in spite of its inclusive-sounding title.

What is surprising about all this is that the periodicals industry, as I've noted, is substantial, however you choose to measure it. More than half of journalists in the UK work for magazines and many more contribute to them on a freelance basis. More people are employed in periodicals and journals than in newspapers in the UK. The periodicals industry frequently creates whole new sectors of publishing as the men's monthlies (1994) and now the men's weeklies (2004) show. We may not admire all of these products but that's no reason to ignore them.

There are many magazines and magazine sectors that would repay serious academic study from scholars in a range of disciplines and yet this kind of work is surprisingly hard to find, given the richness of the material. You might think there would have been plentiful work on women's magazines, even if only by feminist scholars, but there's not that much compared with studies of the reporting of politics and war. There is now a nascent literature in the UK on the men's magazine market but virtually nothing on the trade press even though its publications are known to carry a great deal of influence.

I find all this puzzling and must leave, for another time, my speculations as to why a huge and significant area of publishing goes comparatively unnoticed by scholars of and trainers in journalism. My speculation would be informed by my own feminist perspective and not just in relation to magazines for women. There

are many other possible contributory factors and a discussion of these with students could be as good a point as any from which to broaden the study of journalism beyond newspapers and hard news. After all, it's noticeable that students do, themselves, broaden the agenda as soon as they have the opportunity to choose their own areas of study. Final-year dissertations produce an annual crop of writing about magazines because these are the publications that many students, including those who want to be news reporters, read out of choice. There are school (and university) students who never read any newspapers but who do look at magazines. If magazines are influential, as I believe they are, then surely it is important that they should be given serious practical and critical attention.

At the moment young people who want to become journalists are not routinely encouraged to think about careers in magazines unless their tutors happen to have worked in them. Most careers information about journalism concentrates on careers in hard news even though this is just one aspect of journalistic activity. The Government has recently expressed concern that UK citizens should be properly 'media literate' and culture minister Tessa Jowell believes media literacy to be as important as maths or science.<sup>5</sup> In responding to these suggestions media academics and teachers should realize how influential magazines are as media. Unfortunately there's little evidence in the literature and courses I have surveyed that magazines are taken seriously enough.

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<sup>1</sup> Magazine News, April 2004, issue 73, page 3

<sup>2</sup> Magazines 2004, PPA Conference, May 2004, London

<sup>3</sup> Magazine News, April 2004, issue 73, page 6

<sup>4</sup> Peter Preston, The Hetherington Lecture, Stirling Media Research Institute, Stirling University, 29 September, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> See David Buckingham, 'Survival Skills', The Guardian, 27 July 2004.