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# The Magazine Industry

FACING THE CHALLENGES  
OF THE INTERNET

By John Dorfman

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## Introduction

With steadily declining circulation and advertising revenues fleeing to the Internet, the newspaper industry has been hit hard over the past several years. According to a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal*, market capitalization of newspaper stocks has fallen by 42 percent, or \$23 billion, since 2004, and half of that loss occurred in 2007 alone. Publishers are struggling with the task of delivering the news via the Internet while contending with the Web's no-pay culture and the lower ad rates that are customary there. And a major concern is that even if newspapers do end up migrating to the Web, the public may have lost its taste for in-depth, detailed reporting on "hard" (political and economic) news and instead prefers quick, easy-to-read snippets and lighter, entertainment-oriented fare.

Do magazines have to share in this grim prognosis? As reported by *Media Daily News*, in the first three quarters of 2007, ad revenues for magazines as a whole were up 5.6 percent, so the crisis is not yet upon the industry. There is still time to adopt strategies to ensure that this "old" medium has a rosier future in the digital age.

Actually, in the war of old media versus new media, magazines could be said to occupy a middle ground between the two, which puts them in an advantageous position. Newspapers are definitely in the "old" category, having dominated the world of intensive mass literacy and political awareness that was born in the 18th century, achieved its maximum reach by the mid 20th century and then began to decline. In this first mass-media universe, the word was primary, the image secondary or tertiary. Its demise was brought about by television, which inaugurated the second mass-media universe, the one many if not most of us still inhabit. TV expressed and imposed a basically visual, non-literary culture.

The new media of the 21st century – essentially, Internet-based media – deliver both words and images, but what makes them unique is their interactive nature, which gives publishers or providers the ability to update their content at any time and readers or consumers the ability to choose the ways in which they receive that content. This is the third mass-media universe, which we are now moving into and which we are still trying to understand and deal with.

Magazines as we know them evolved in the 1920s and '30s, amid the social change that followed World War I. In the United States, Henry Luce and Briton Hadden created *Time*, the first great news weekly, which presented news analysis, broad perspectives and a witty voice that took readers far beyond the bare facts of the newspaper headlines and spawned many imitators, most notably *Newsweek*. In France and Germany, pioneering editors like Lucien Vogel, Stefan Lorant and Kurt Korff created pictorial magazines such as *Vu* and *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*. These aimed to satisfy the public's increasingly ravenous appetite for vivid, un-artificial images of news events and daily life, integrating words and photographs to create the first true picture stories. Luce himself turned imitator when he launched *Life* in 1936; it was a distinctly American version of *Vu* or *BIZ*, and used many of the same photographers, who by then had fled Hitler for the U.S. In the

postwar U.S., magazines flourished, as publishing empires like Time-Life, Hearst and Condé Nast brought out a plethora of titles from the general-interest to the highly specialized, from the densely text-heavy to the glossily pictorial. Today there are some 7,200 titles on the newsstands in this country.

As a medium, therefore, the magazine is, in a sense, halfway between the print culture and the image culture. In addition, with the proliferation of niche titles, it could be argued that magazines share some of the targeted quality of Web sites. Magazines could, in fact, without too much of a stretch be called “new old media” or “old new media.” This peculiar status bodes well for their continued viability in the Internet age. Magazines by their very nature are better positioned to meet the challenge of the Internet than newspapers are, and they can do so by simultaneously fighting and joining the competition.

### **Strategies for Survival and Prosperity**

**1. Play to the medium’s strengths.** This falls under the heading of fighting the competition. The best magazines already have much of what they need to remain viable in the years ahead:

a) Visual and tactile appeal. Readers will continue to value magazines that feature high-quality images, whether photographs or other types of illustrations, printed on high-quality paper stock. Such magazines provide visual and tactile pleasure that can never even remotely be equaled by a Web page. A well-designed and produced magazine can reach a level of eye appeal that approaches or equals that of “coffee-table” books, lavish art books or photo books. Handling a thick, glossy magazine is a far more satisfying experience than scrolling through a Web site, no matter how well-designed it may be – and there are, of course, many wonderfully constructed sites. Web images can be very high-quality reproductions, especially if viewed on the right kind of screen, but they don’t have the lasting value of a printed picture. Which brings us to the next point:

b) Relative permanence. Of course, nothing is forever, not even the Gutenberg Bible, but magazines have qualities that make readers want to keep them far longer than they would ever think of keeping a newspaper (unless they are pack-rats in the league of the Collyer brothers). The above-mentioned aesthetic value is one reason why people keep magazines; another is the presence of rich, in-depth text content. Magazine articles tend to deal in stories that are more “timeless” than those in newspapers – or that at least have a shelf-life measurable in weeks or months rather than hours or days – and those that make a serious contribution may be as lasting in value as an excellent book on the subject. All of this is in stark contrast to Web sites, which are evanescent by their very nature. Not only are they updated and changed constantly, but one can never be sure when a bookmarked Web page will be taken down for good. The slipcases that art magazines and other luxury-oriented titles used to offer so that subscribers could lovingly preserve their issues may seem a bit pretentious, but offering them again could actually be a good marketing strategy. The best magazines are just too beautiful and interesting to throw away, and if publishers concentrate on production values, they will take an

important step toward cementing their status as goods with which the Internet simply cannot compete.

c) Eyeball traction. While reliable statistics on the subject are not easy to come by, it appears that readers do not generally have much patience for reading long content on the Web. The glare of computer screens, the need to constantly scroll down, ergonomic fatigue and the jumpy, short attention-span mindset induced by Web-surfing conspire to make people quit reading after the first couple of pages of a long article online, and move on to something else. Magazines are easy on the eye, can be held comfortably and taken anywhere – even, God forbid, to places where Internet connectivity is not available. Like books, they encourage longer periods of reading and reflection. Those publications that deal in serious, thoughtful content would do well not to post that content online, where it would likely not find the readership it deserves and needs, or at least would not be read by those readers with the care and completeness they would otherwise give it. From the advertising point of view, magazine ads – especially full-page or spreads – stand a much better chance of being looked at and having their message sink in than the tiny, fleeting boxes that pop up here and there during a bout of Web surfing or lurk on the margins of Web pages.

**2. Don't try to beat the Web at its own game.** In today's world, no magazine can afford not to have an Internet presence, but magazine Web sites should not undermine or compete with the printed product. Nor should they aim to do things that are basically untrue to the core mission of a magazine.

a) Don't give away the store. It sounds obvious, but making a magazine issue available online in its entirety – especially free of charge – creates a powerful incentive not to buy the physical magazine, while, as mentioned above, ensuring that many of those who read online will take less away from the interaction than they otherwise would. *Newsweek* decided to make all its content available online gratis, and it should come as no surprise that the magazine's page count is lower than ever as ads grow fewer. *Wired* also makes all its content available on its Web site – not to do so might put off readers of a magazine that is all about the electronic universe – but uses a clever strategy to avoid stealing the printed page's thunder. The feature articles go online several days after the physical magazine comes out.

b) Don't imitate new media. A magazine's Web site would do well not to include such gimmicks as reader discussion forums, contests or polls. While these may appear to create a sense of "community" and drum up interest, in reality they do nothing to increase the value of the actual magazine, not to readers and certainly not to advertisers. And besides, Internet users can find plenty of sites with better, more active forums for such activities than magazine publishers could ever create. Another mistake for magazines to avoid is that of using their Web sites as a dumping ground for content that for reasons of quality, newsworthiness or length didn't quite make the grade for the print edition. To do so is simply to degrade the brand.

**3. Create Web sites that truly support the magazine and engage its readers.** Going into the second decade of the Internet age, magazine publishers need to have Web sites, and they also need to make sure that the sites are synergistic with the printed content rather than redundant. Web content should complement the magazine, not repeat it, and “Web extras” should, in the final analysis, have the effect of increasing readers’ appetite for the physical magazine itself. There are several ways to do this.

a) Create a two-tiered structure by reserving the printed page for relatively “timeless” content and using the Web site to post the newsier material that spoils quickly. Especially in the case of magazines that cover a particular specialty field, such as art, science, fashion, etc., there is a need to cover newsworthy happenings in that field, even if they are reported in other media such as the newspapers or TV. Not to cover them at all on the grounds that they are covered elsewhere creates the impression that the magazine is out of touch. Nonetheless, to publish such news items in the physical magazine leads to inevitable staleness, especially if it is a monthly, since long production cycles ensure that any news is one to two months out of date by the time readers receive the magazine. Even weeklies can’t possibly keep up with the rapid pace of news.

Having news articles posted directly to the Web completely obviates the problem, and even makes it possible to update or correct at any time. The physical magazine – a “keeper” for readers if the strategies enumerated in the first section above are adopted – then becomes a place only for feature stories on more or less evergreen topics, visually rewarding pictures, and in-depth analysis of news-related matters that does not date in the way that spot news does. In this way, the magazine can truly fulfill its role as a medium intermediate between books and newspapers, while using the Internet to remain on top of events in an ever-faster-paced world.

Listings of events related to the interest category of the magazine could also migrate to the Web, as they could be kept more up-to-date in that way, and not waste valuable page space with image-light material. Travel magazines could put practical tips and recommendations online and save the pages for more gorgeous photographs and descriptive writing.

The question of whether such Web-exclusive material should be free or charged for is not as important as it sounds. Subscriptions are a drop in the bucket in terms of profits compared to ad revenues, anyway. The reasons for charging or not charging may be more psychological than financial. In the culture of the Internet, users tend to resent and avoid non-free content, but then, magazine Web sites should be aimed primarily at those who already read – and pay for – the physical magazine. However, readers who have paid on the newsstand and are not subscribers may well resent paying more to access the newsier, frequently updated content on the Web site. Arguably, for a certain type of consumer, making something free makes it less desirable, and in the profitable luxury and high-net-worth magazine world, that is particularly true. On the other hand, one purpose of a magazine Web site should be to advertise the magazine and attract new readers. Being able to read content online while passively surfing is a far more effective teaser than locked content.

b) Create special content for the Web that encourages readers to pick up the magazine and that solidifies their relationship to the magazine. One possibility is “extras”: sidelights that would be of limited interest to someone who hadn’t already read the magazine but would add to the experience of one who had. These include musical recordings referred to in the texts of stories and other audio and video material that supports stories but obviously cannot go in a printed magazine. Interviews with writers and editors that go into the “back story” of how articles are researched and written are also interesting to many readers. *The New Yorker* has created a particularly good Web site along these lines. Other, somewhat less attractive options include longer versions of interviews and additional photographs that page space wouldn’t accommodate in the magazine – essentially outtakes. Another good strategy is making as much older material (back issues or individual articles) as possible available online to subscribers. This has the effect of creating a deeper mental and emotional connection with the magazine and its history, and also enables readers to connect their current reading to previous coverage. This increased context strengthens the reader’s connection to the magazine’s brand, rather than just to individual articles or writers. *The New Yorker* also has a great deal of archival material online, as does *Time*, which makes a special point of making all of its covers available as images searchable by date.

## **Industry Winners and Losers**

This brief sampling of major titles is intended not to be a comprehensive analysis or critique but a snapshot of the present moment. The winners are those magazines that have developed truly value-adding Web sites and seem poised to move into the Internet age without losing their integrity as magazines. The losers are once-eminent or successful titles that, at least right now, look like digital dinosaurs.

### **Winners**

#### ***The New Yorker***

This eight-decade-old general-interest magazine has completely overcome its former reputation for preciousness and stodginess and entered the Internet era with a flourish. While it does not fulfill all the criteria for “playing to the strengths” of the magazine form, due to its extreme text-heaviness, its elegantly designed Web site offers a wealth of features without giving away the store. Several articles are available in full, but to read the majority of the content, readers must buy the print edition.

Among the site’s features are audio readings by authors and interviews with authors, podcasts, photographic slide shows, blogs by staff writers, links to purchase *The New Yorker*’s products and promotions, events listings, lists of “most read” stories, excerpts from books reviewed in the current issue, and the archives of the magazine, available to subscribers. There is even a video animation, in color, of a *New Yorker* cartoon. The entire site screams “intelligent brand reinforcement.” Interestingly, there are no ads for anything other than *The New Yorker* itself (except for a tiny “Ads by Google” bar at the top of the home page.)

### ***Vanity Fair***

Condé Nast's flagship title has over the last couple of decades found a general-interest magazine publishing formula that is second to none. By combining intellectually serious cultural commentary and hard-hitting investigative news reporting with frankly trashy Hollywood-oriented material, *VF* has been able to bring together disparate groups of readers. Its Web site is quite similar to *The New Yorker's* in terms of offerings, although, probably due to the nature of the magazine, a little less intensely branded. One particularly appealing feature is the way an article from the current issue is accompanied by pieces from the archives that touch on related material or include past coverage of the same story.

### ***National Geographic***

For a publication that made its name with photographs from the world's remoter corners, it is only fitting that *National Geographic's* Web site is extremely image-heavy and has a very eye-grabbing design. The magazine actually represents only a small portion of a huge site dedicated to all the activities of the parent organization, the National Geographic Society. The magazine portion of the site does an excellent job of taking readers behind the scenes to virtually share in the adventurous journeys involved in the creation of the stories. The selection of photographs and videos is, characteristically, impressive, and there is also a daily news section of the site, actually reported by staffers, not just culled from the AP, Yahoo, and so forth, as on many sites. But pleasing as the site is to navigate through, the physical magazine is still more visually stimulating, and the electronic version will drive readers to the printed page.

### **Losers**

***Time, Newsweek, U.S. News & World Report:*** Although they are quite different from each other in some ways, we are lumping these together because they represent what appears to be a dying breed. The traditional weekly newsmagazine, after a long and glorious run, is in serious trouble. Circulations are flat, and percentage losses of ad pages have gone into the double digits in the past year. Obviously, the speed with which news can be gathered and transmitted makes a weekly news summary increasingly irrelevant, but there is a deeper problem. In today's fractionated world of diverse opinion, with the Web teeming with citizen journalists, bloggers and i-reporters, the public has less and less patience with being talked down to by elites writing in a "voice of God" style.

*Time* and *Newsweek* have done major revamps lately, aiming to stay relevant by stressing analysis over news and offering longer articles and fewer pictures. Both magazines have also, apparently in the service of avoiding easily dated hard news, adopted the policy of giving a large percentage of covers over to "soft-ball" human interest stories such as "What Makes Us Good/Evil" or "The Importance of Birth Order" – to name two *Time* cover stories within the last three months. These strategies smack of desperation, and it is unlikely that they will work. They certainly can never return these publications to the place they once held in the public's esteem.

In Web terms, all three magazines look weak. Their unexciting sites, despite some multimedia features, are basically indistinguishable from those of newspapers. *U.S News* in particular is stodgy and dull, with no interactive features whatsoever. *Newsweek* has lately purged references to its partner MSNBC from its site (it was formerly hosted by MSNBC's Web site), but *Time* still puts CNN's logo right up at the top next to its own, compromising its brand's integrity. It also makes its content (as well as that of its sister publication *Sports Illustrated*) available through CNN's home page, which may direct more readers to *Time* but at the cost of making the magazine appear subordinate to CNN.

### ***People***

This is an example of a Web site that is almost too good – in the sense that it does everything the magazine can do but better. Celebrity aficionados are already online all the time trolling for breaking news. *People*'s site calls itself the “#1 Celebrity Site on the Web”, and that seems to be an arguably accurate description. So why have the magazine at all? People.com offers all the paparazzi shots (which hardly need to be beautifully reproduced on high-quality paper), all the news and rumor, that the magazine does, and more – and more quickly. The Web is really the best medium for this kind of material, so the print magazine's days are most likely numbered.

## **Conclusion**

While newspapers may eventually be forced to distribute their product entirely over the Web, magazines should be able to remain in their present form indefinitely, provided they do two things: One – make a product that readers want to hold in their hands, take with them wherever they go, look at again and again for the beauty of the images and layout, and keep long past the date on the cover. Two – establish a presence on the Web that strengthens the brand and attracts readers without compromising the integrity and viability of the primary product. The savvy publishers who can accomplish these feats should find a rich bounty of readers and advertisers in the 21st century.

## **About the Author**

John Dorfman is Senior Editor of *Art & Antiques* magazine. He has been involved in journalism since 1994, when he was hired as a fact checker by *The New Yorker*. Since then he has worked as an editor and writer for magazines and newspapers including *The Forward*, *The Bond Buyer* and *Art & Auction*, and has contributed articles to *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Discover*, *Archaeology*, *Lingua Franca* and *Columbia Journalism Review*. Mr. Dorfman has also appeared as an expert commentator on CNBC. He has an undergraduate and graduate degree, respectively, from Princeton and Harvard, and resides in Brooklyn, New York with his wife and son.

**TRANSMEDIA INSTITUTE**

**410 Park Avenue, 15th Floor  
New York, NY 10022**

**Tel: 212-581-3500**

**Fax: 212-581-5761**

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