

Are magazines really dying out?

Though the internet is a serious threat, its ephemeral nature is no match for the tangibility of print



Lisa Maclean
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Creators and publishers of printed zines and magazines are dealing with the growing possibility of their medium being rendered obsolete by the expansion of online media – many already offering internet-only subscriptions and exclusive content for social networking followers.

The potential of the iPad as a sustainable and viable platform is one that many creatives take seriously, however. But when Apple announced recently that iPad editions will have to have any nudity pre-censored, it immediately provoked a reaction from the makers of lifestyle/high-fashion publications such as Nylon, Vice and Dazed & Confused, where the iPad version has already mockingly been nicknamed the "Iran edition".

Apple's decision raises a serious question to the makers of cutting-edge publications: tone down content and wave goodbye to artistic integrity to make sure your seat on the bandwagon is secure, or take a stand and risk being left behind should the digital generation decide to ditch their earthly belongings and embrace a lifestyle of transient online information.

Embracing the concept of digitalised media (and adjusting your product accordingly) is certainly seen as an increasingly pragmatic idea. The overall circulation of arguably the most recognisable name in the magazine world, Vogue, has fallen by 4.8% in recent years. Big-name publishers IPC Media, Condé Nast and Future Publishing have batted down the hatches and invested heavily in the internet, as well as television, radio and mobile.

The looming threat casts a shadow from these corporate leviathans all the way to the grassroots photocopies-and-staples style publications. Creator of the infamous underground zine Murder Can Be Fun, John Marr declared in his 1999 essay "Zines Are Dead": "The quirky spirit of zines hasn't died. It's just migrated to the web. If I was starting out today, no way would I mess with hard copy – I'd go straight to the net. It's cheaper, easier, and faster. Unfortunately, everyone knows this. The web has made a reality out of the fantasies of certain dewy-eyed zine theoreticians: everyone these days really can be their own publisher."

But can the magazine as a concept ever really die? Personally, I suspect that Marr is too pessimistic and jaded by 24 years of paper cuts and photocopier ink under his nails. There were previous examples of a time when a new mass media introduction heralded doomsday for magazine publishing. At the turn of the 20th century with the introduction of motion pictures; from 1920 onwards with the growing popularity of radio; and in 1949 with the first official broadcasts of network television in the US.

The magazine publishing industry withstood these incidents like survivors of a nuclear holocaust in some far-fetched science fiction story, waiting for the fallout to dissipate and adapting to their surroundings to build a new future. The growing cinema industry caused so much interest that wasn't satisfied by simply watching that it actually spawned a selection of new magazines dealing with cinema, movies, film stars and production. Radio, while popular, was swamped with intrusive advertising and not visual enough to land a fatal blow on the publication industry. Television was popular too, but the mass appeal caused a renaissance in the publishing world: by introducing viewers to a whole host of culture, hobbies and interests, the demand for niche publications grew massively. The magazine publishing industry is notoriously cut-throat and transitional; will it really succumb to another similar cultural shift?

While the internet is a magnificent resource, and the prospect of having our primary media source composed of user-generated content is wonderful and liberating, but will humanity ever accept the idea of completely ephemeral media? The internet can offer faster, relevant news and information, it can provide a multimedia experience on demand, but it cannot provide you with something tangible – and that is the fatal flaw.

Humanity views ownership as a marker of status. We crave possessions because they anchor us and act as a safety blanket. Right now we are in a period of transition, and the shift to digital media has already produced compromises between internet and print

with exciting new concepts such as augmented reality proving to be very popular. Of course there was going to be a lull while people explore the possibilities of fully digital media, but with the inevitability of subscriber content taking over it is only a matter of time before the grass doesn't seem so green any more. Sterile, saturated and recycled are descriptions already beginning to circulate about blogging and webzines – before their popularity has even reached its zenith.

It would be sensationalist to claim printed zines and magazines were going to cease to exist, but then we live in an age of sensationalist media. We can rationalise a hypothetical scenario of a loner living in a house with years of hoarded newspapers and magazines stacked to the ceiling – but can anyone imagine the same house piled high with external hard drives, iPads and Kindles?

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