# An Examination of the Role of Magazines in Historical Research and Analysis

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#### Introduction

Magazine publishing has provided a rich source of materials for writers seeking to engage in historical research and analysis. On the one hand, the production and distribution of these periodicals has constituted an important form of activity in the early development of cultural industries. Combining both textual and graphical forms of printing, magazine production has been responsible for generating important, district-level clustering of interdependent businesses, specialising in the various skilled tasks required to manufacture these periodicals, which has culminated in a substantial modern industry (Cox/Mowatt 2014). On the other hand, the magazines themselves have generated a valuable legacy of documentation that has been exploited by a wide range of specialists within the discipline of history. Social historians, for example, have studied the significance of illustrated periodicals for their role in promoting literacy and reading for leisure (Altick 1998; Ashley 2006; Tilley 2020). Political historians meanwhile have noted the importance of magazines that featured cartoons such as Punch (1841-1992) and John Bull (1906-1964) for providing critical, often tellingly satirical, commentary on contemporary areas of debate (Reed 1997; de Nie 2020). Early writers in the field of gender studies were also informed and influenced by the many publications that were directed towards a purely female audience (White 1970; Ferguson 1983; Beetham 1996). In addition, cultural historians have made use of the influence of individual mass-circulation magazine titles, such as the Picture Post (1938–1957), and the careers of publishing entrepreneurs like George Newnes, to study how magazines both shaped and reflected changing social conventions and behaviour (Weightman 1991; Jackson 2001). The evolution of magazine design itself has also developed as a recent area of historical interest (Quinn 2016).

The present chapter will highlight some of the ways in which writers in the various disciplines of history have exploited the legacy of these weekly and monthly

periodicals as they seek to study and interpret processes of long-term change and development. The chapter begins by looking at the historical evolution of magazine production as a commercial activity and the importance of technological change. It then turns to consider themes of historical research that have been explored by effectively engaging with and exploiting the content provided by these published periodicals.

The examples of historical research highlighted here have drawn on the publishing legacy provided by British magazines between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. During this 300 year period, Britain emerged as a particularly fertile location for the development of magazines. As Rooney (2020) has recently explained, it was primarily in relation to consumer accessibility that Britain was able to pioneer a substantial magazine publishing industry. These issues of accessibility stem from the country's strengths in relation to literacy rates, a growing, nationwide capacity for the physical distribution of commodities, and the relatively widespread availability of suitable reading spaces. A relatively high level of basic literacy that developed during the eighteenth century (Slack 1985: 187) was further advanced by state involvement in elementary education from the 1830s, providing British publishers with the largest common-language population of readers in Europe during the nineteenth century (Tombs 2014: 372, 515; Vincent 2000: 14, 31). Moreover, this increasingly urbanised population was served by an internal transport system of wellmaintained roads and, by mid-century, railways. Beginning in 1792, the firm of W.H. Smith was able to exploit these transport developments to create a system of national periodical distribution, which ultimately included their own network of railway station bookstalls and high street shops (Wilson 1985). The railways were also responsible for providing a space in which magazine reading could be undertaken, along with the growing number of reading rooms that were arising from the civic expansion of public libraries in most major towns and cities of Britain.

In the English-speaking world, this wealth of British magazines provides an extremely rich source of archive of material, with many eighteenth and nineteenth century collections being made available in digital form via the British Library holdings. By the twentieth century, however, a growing number of the publications circulating in Britain were being produced by American firms such as William Hearst's National Magazine Company and its New York rival Condé Nast. The relative developments in British and American popular magazine publishing in the

period between 1880 and 1960 have been well reviewed by Reed (1997). In the non-English speaking world, both France and Germany developed important illustrated magazines during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the case of France the nineteenth century witnessed the creation of influential illustrated magazines centred on Paris, specialising particularly in the field of fashionable clothing such as *Le Moniteur de la Mode*. In Germany, the advances in printing technology and photography (particularly the Leica hand-held camera) meant that this country excelled in high quality photojournalism publications during the 1920s and 1930s, as for example with the magazine *Muncher Illustriete Press*. The evidence set out in the present chapter based upon research into British-based publications is thus designed to highlight, in general, the way in which magazines have provided researchers with important source materials and historical insights.

# The Magazine Industry Over Time

Historians have studied the commercial aspects of magazines in Britain from a variety of perspectives. Economic historians, for example, have examined the magazine industry particularly in relation to the influence of government policy. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the introduction of taxes on newspapers, their commercial advertising content, and the key raw material of paper – collectively generally referred to as the 'taxes on knowledge' – have, in terms of their impact on the periodical publishing industry, represented a key area of concern amongst political economists and business historians (Asquith 1978; Black 2001; Cox/Mowatt 2020). These fiscal measures influenced both the composition of periodical publishing activities and the evolution of technology in relation to the production of magazines during the nineteenth century (Roberto 2020).

A stamp duty was first levied on newspapers in 1712, and its introduction provided a stimulus to forms of publishing that avoided the dissemination of news in favour of periodicals that provided entertaining reading matter. Thus, the origins of Britain's magazine publishing industry can be found in the group of enterprises that grew up during the early eighteenth century in the area of London north of the River Thames around Blackfriars that became known colloquially as Grub Street. This cluster comprised a collection of small-scale jobbing printers, illustrators, proto-

journalists (generally referred to as hacks), and street sellers (hawkers), who together formed an early example of an industrial district. In 1731 a journalist by the name of Edward Cave, who had already published a variety of one-off pamphlets, launched a monthly periodical entitled the *Gentleman's Magazine* (1731-1907). Printed at St John's Gate in London and featuring an attractive etching of this building on each cover, the monthly miscellany that Cave created drew on material already issued by other journals – a typical ploy for early magazine publishers. Cave's formula for commercial success was predicated equally on the content it provided each month and on its distribution beyond London via a network of booksellers in the provinces with whom he had developed a working relationship (Clarke 2004). Astonishingly, Cave's creation endured in continuous production for 175 years, as it changed hands from publisher to publisher until its demise in 1907 (Brake/Demoor 2009).

During and following the period of the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815), the taxes on knowledge were raised sharply. The main impact of the fiscal policies adopted in Britain with regard to periodical publishing was felt from the beginning of the 1820s. Consequently, the second quarter of the nineteenth century was a particularly vital period for the growth in circulation of magazines in Britain: the punitive taxes levied against newspapers and the high cost of bound volumes allowed weekly and monthly magazines to provide a range of reading material that could be enhanced through the insertion of illustrative woodcuts, perhaps best exemplified by Charles Knight's highly popular weekly *The Penny Magazine* (1832-1845) (Anderson 1991: 50–83). This period also saw the introduction of monthly magazines that played a crucial role in the provision of popular fiction (Pearson, 2000). For example, throughout his writing career, which began with a short story published in the *Monthly Magazine* (1796-1843) in 1833, the novels of Charles Dickens invariably first reached their audience by way of serial magazines, initially selling at a price of one shilling per issue (Tomalin 2011).

In addition to the fiscal measures that stimulated the production of such periodicals, innovations in the technology of printing played a key role in allowing magazines to act as pioneers of new forms of reading matter. The technique of stereotyping, which was developed in the 1820s, meant that illustrations and typesetting could be preserved, enabling back issues of magazines to be reprinted at relatively low cost. In a few cases this reprinting capacity allowed for a single issue of

a magazine to sell in excess of 100,000 copies. The earliest example of such a mass-consumption periodical in Britain is held to be the *Mirror of Literature*, *Amusement, and Instruction* (1822-1849), published in London by John Limbird and sold weekly at a price of 2d. (Topham 2005: 76; Cox/Mowatt 2014: 4). A little more than a decade later, early issues of Charles Knight's *Penny Magazine* were selling more than 200,000 copies (Altick 1998: 335), demonstrating critical advances in the technology of printing together with a growing ability to produce types of illustrated magazines that appealed to, and could be afforded by, a broader readership.

The newspaper stamp duty was reduced significantly in 1836 before its final abolition in 1855. Thereafter advances in technology were a key driver of success in magazine production. Over time, it is possible to find periods during which technological progress particularly favoured the production of printed material in the format of a magazine. Towards the end of the nineteenth century a cluster of technological innovations in the field of letterpress printing and graphical reproduction, along with more cost effective raw materials, notably in the form of wood pulp to produce paper, facilitated a period of rapid growth in both the number of new titles and the unprecedented popularity of a handful of magazines such as Tit-Bits (1881), Answers to Correspondents (1888), and Pearson's Weekly (1890) the sales of each were in the region of one million copies per week by the late 1890s. These latter magazines found a growing market amongst urban commuters, who, before the advent of popular daily newspapers, provided a mass of new readers. Using the increasing opportunities available to employ outdoor display advertising, and stimulating sales by means of reader competitions, a group of new publishing firms developed, able to establish huge circulation figures for their titles. Such magazines, offering a cheap form of diversion and entertainment, constituted a defining feature of modern life in Britain during the late Victorian and the Edwardian eras. In addition, they provided the bedrock upon which enterprises such as George Newnes, Harmsworth Brothers, and C. Arthur Pearson were able to establish magazine publishing as a form of large-scale business featuring extensive and highly unionised workforces (Engel 1996; Cox/Mowatt 2014).

Another breakthrough in printing can be found in the technologies that led to an expansion in magazines using high quality monochrome and colour illustrations from the 1930s to the 1950s. By the 1930s, print-based products such as magazines made up one component of a media world that had been broadened considerably by

the introduction of both the cinema and radio broadcasting. In the publishing field, the most significant development during this period was the perfection of high-speed gravure printing. The technique of gravure printing was based on the established technique of etched copper plates and provided a much higher quality of photographic reproduction than the prevailing letterpress system of halftones (a relief technique based on dot matrices). Pioneered, and then dominated, by two firms – Sun Printers and Odhams Press – the process of high-speed gravure printing allowed for the introduction of colour pages in the leading women's weekly magazines, both for editorial content and much of their display advertising, as well as the emergence of low priced but high-quality illustrated weeklies such as *The Picture Post* (1938), and *Illustrated* (1939) (Greenhill/Reynolds 2010). Stimulated by the drama of wartime photography, such illustrated magazines provide a touchstone of the cultural milieu of British everyday life in the 1940s and 1950s (Weighman 1991).

More recently still, the final two decades of the twentieth century brought the advent of computer-aided digital systems of layout and printing that enabled costeffective production of magazines featuring relatively small print-runs. Desktop publishing software and linked forms of printing, based on the long-established graphical technique of lithography, enabled the growth of specialist monthly magazines with editorial features and advertising targeted at well-defined interest groups. Particularly significant growth was also generated in the previously underexploited segment of men's lifestyle magazines, together with celebrity titles that allowed much scope for international editions to harness the rapidly expanding culture of globalisation. Ultimately, the emergence of the World Wide Web in the late 1990s began a trend away from printed content and eventually saw the emergence of virtual magazines. Indeed, for historians concerned with the modern era, the magazine industry provides an important case study of the impact of the digital revolution and the beginnings of the era of social media – a realm in which the platforms provided by online magazines now constitute a significant array of cultural focal points (Cox/Mowatt 2008).

### Analysing the content of magazines

Viewed from the perspective of magazine content serving as a form of source material for historians, it is possible to identify a number of research areas that have effectively utilised this publishing legacy. Writers addressing issues such as contemporary political and religious debates, the extent of literacy, and the emergence of leisure activities among different groups of people have all found magazine-based research to be of great value. The field of gender studies has been strongly influenced by the nature of the content circulated by magazines, particularly the mass-circulation titles aimed exclusively at females. Indeed, the population of magazine titles has been strongly subdivided by gender throughout its history (Brake 1995: 104).

Magazines aimed at well-educated men who held radical political views were widespread in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. An analysis of their contents thus provides an important legacy of the testimony that derived from those writers who sought to drive forward the agenda of political reform. As media historian Martin Conboy has pointed out:

It was the periodical tradition, rather than the newspaper proper, that was the locus for serious challenges to the government and contestations of the accepted norms of latitude for commentary and debate in the press, moving across, for example, from the eighteenth century formats of the *Tatler*, *Spectator*, *Examiner* and the *Gentleman's Magazine* through to the *True Briton* of John Wilkes in the late eighteenth century. (Conboy 2020: 508).

This radical tradition of magazines was continued in the nineteenth century, notably in relation to the political rights of working men, with titles such as the *Poor Man's Guardian*, along with the allied cause that sought to bring about the abolition of the Corn Laws. This latter campaign was designed to reduce tariffs on imported grain and thus lower the price of bread, the staple commodity of Britain's growing urban workforce. Indeed, the modern-day *Economist* magazine was founded in 1843, by the political activist Walter Bagehot, precisely to promote this cause (Thompson 2020: 541).

Advocacy for political and religious reform during the nineteenth century was increasingly supported by the technique of lampooning. This brought to prominence satirical magazines such as *Punch*, which was founded in 1841. The text and illustrations of magazines like *Punch* and *Vanity Fair* (founded 1868) have provided a rich source of material for cultural and political historians to analyse a range of issues. Dominic Janes (2014: 66), for example, has argued that "studying the combination of word and image in *Punch* satires can lead us to a fuller appreciation of the degree to which visual appearance provided a key focal point for religious contestation in early and mid-Victorian Britain." His analysis of the early contents of

Punch shows that the magazine's initial attacks on Evangelicalism, spearheaded by Douglas Jerrold, gave way after 1850 to a more concerted anti-Catholic editorial line under William Makepeace Thackeray. Central themes of this latter campaign were the depiction of the Catholic Church as grossly materialistic and the fuelling of prevailing unease among non-Catholics concerning the treatment of young girls in convents. Such fears lent themselves readily to the work of cartoonists such as John Leech who depicted, in one telling example, a Catholic priest enticing a young heiress to surrender her fortune as she is persuaded to take the veil (Janes 2014: 73).

Political historian John Osbourne has shown how the images depicted in Vanity Fair's political caricatures provided the magazine's editor, Thomas Gibson Bowles, with the ammunition he required to critique Britain's leading politicians between 1868 and 1889. The magazine's circulation rose sharply in 1869 following the introduction of political caricatures from the pen of illustrator Carlo Pelligrini, which took the form of full-page colour lithographic prints. As Osbourne (2007: 307) points out, "Bowles envisioned these caricatures as caricature portraits, and envisioned them as being of an entirely different genre than the cartoons found in the periodical literature of the day." In essence, the illustrations were intended to exaggerate features of the subject in ways that coalesced with the text provided by Bowles. As the magazine's editor, he sought to promote the importance of national issues above those of narrow party values. Thus Sir Stafford Northcote, the Conservative Party leader in the House of Commons in the 1880s, was characterised by Bowles as an unprincipled party man, and the accompanying caricature presented him as a stooped, timid, unintelligent, and characterless individual (Osbourne 2007: 311). Pelligrini was succeeded as the leading illustrator for Vanity Fair by Leslie Ward who, under the pen name Spy, became Britain's most renowned caricaturist of the late Victorian period, providing the perfect foil for Bowles' political invective.

Despite their clear historical significance, both *Punch* and *Vanity Fair* were aimed at a relatively narrow readership centred on an elite male audience, reflecting partly the lack of working class and female enfranchisement. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, a far greater proportion of British men had been granted the right to vote, and the demand for female suffrage was emerging as a major political issue. Following the Third Reform Act of 1884, about sixty-three per cent of

the adult male population of Britain had been enfranchised, and efforts to recruit their political support through the printed media became of critical importance. In general it was the emerging popular daily newspapers that served to shape the political affiliations of these newly enfranchised men. Among the popular magazines that emerged during the era prior to the First World War, a title that proved particularly successful in its exploitation of political issues to build a large readership was the Independent MP Horatio Bottomley's *John Bull* magazine. As a political maverick, Bottomley attempted to undermine the entrenched, self-serving two-party structure of British politics and replace it with a regime that focused on providing support to business interests: a 'Business Government'. The editorial content of John Bull wrapped up its political message in a popular magazine format and invited readers to align themselves proactively with the anti-corruption stance adopted by Bottomley. The graphic cartoons of Frank Holland were utilised to promote Bottomley – in his guise as John Bull – and his political objectives, while the magazine's readers were encouraged to join the John Bull League, which became increasingly politicised. A comparison of the contents of Bottomley's magazine with the three leading rival weekly titles in 1910 highlights how John Bull eschewed fiction and placed far greater emphasis on public affairs, business issues, and economic and social problems (Cox/Mowatt 2019). This combination of satire and serious campaigning made John Bull a publishing phenomenon in Britain in the years before and during the First World War. Although Bottomley's domestic political objectives were ultimately thwarted by the outbreak of hostilities in 1914, John Bull continued to thrive and by 1918 was reaching a weekly audience of over two million readers – a new benchmark for a popular magazine in Britain.

The rapid expansion in the number of magazine titles in the two decades from 1880 was particularly pronounced in the field of women's titles. As Kathryn Ledbetter (2020) points out, by the 1870s the focus of women's magazines had begun to broaden, expanding from the traditional concerns of leisure and domesticity to embrace a range of issues such as voting rights, employment opportunities, and higher education. These new aspects of female consciousness were largely encapsulated by the term 'New Woman': a woman who was depicted as intelligent, independent, and socially progressive. In surveying the contents of magazines aimed at young girls, Kristine Moruzi (2017) identifies the dilemma young women faced around this time, between performing home duties and benefitting from higher

education. She shows that a range of magazines with varying political and religious agendas began to encourage girls to consider applying to the recently formed women-only colleges at Oxford, Cambridge, and London Universities (Moruzi 2017). Not surprisingly, the concept of the New Woman was lampooned in the satirical press, most notably in *Punch*. Tracy Collins (2010) uses nine cartoons from this latter publication to highlight the depiction of New Women dressed in sporting attire that had traditionally been worn exclusively by men. Her conclusion is striking:

Whether or not the concept of the New Woman was founded entirely on fact, her very visible (thanks to *Punch*) masculinized sport clothing imprinted social history indelibly. More importantly, *Punch* gave a contesting athletic body to the performance of female emancipation, not only in the *fin de siècle*, but also in the juggernaut of the woman's movement that would become so robust in the new century. (Collins 2010: 332)

Notwithstanding the successful struggle that was waged to achieve female suffrage at the beginning of the twentieth century, by far the most significant legacy in the archive of popular women's magazines relates to their role in the domestic, rather than the political, sphere of life. The huge success of Samuel and Isabella Beeton's publications – featuring at their heart the *Englishwoman's Domestic* Magazine, first published in 1852 – was founded on the twin pillars of beauty/fashion/clothing and household affairs, which became the staple concerns of women's magazines for generations (Beetham 1996; Codell 2018). The need to attract revenue from advertisers made such materialistic concerns an editorial necessity for mass-circulation women's magazines. In a detailed content analysis of all 377 issues of Women's Own, published between October 1932 and December 1939, Greenfield and Reid (1998) show that issues of domestic management (cookery, childcare, and housekeeping) accounted for 34 per cent of the featured articles, and those relating to appearance (knitting and sewing, beauty and fashion) amounted to 43 per cent. These interests dovetailed neatly with the advertising content of the magazine, which itself expanded from an average of 10 pages (28.7) per cent) per issue in 1932 to 24 pages (46.3 per cent) by the end of the period studied (Greenfield/Reid 1998).

The significance of advertising as one component of a magazine's contents can be assessed in comparative terms, as well as over time. As Laurel Brake (2015) points out, some of the various directories of periodicals that emerged from the midnineteenth century provide data on advertising rates charged by different journals, which can be cross tabulated with sales figures to gauge variations in a magazine's

influence over its readers' expenditure. Although these directories have not been digitised, online databases of eighteenth and nineteenth century periodicals have been assembled. Thus, in assessing the evolution of the leisure and hobby segment of the periodical press, Christopher Kent (2020) uses the digitised contents of the Waterloo Directories to sample the enormous range of titles relevant to the theme of leisure. In a detailed foray into the universe of digital periodical databases, Linda Hughes (2014: 21) illustrates how the process of searching such databases via keywords provides an instrument for "discovering hitherto unsuspected dialogues among texts emanating from very different formations of class, gender, politics and symbolic capital." Thus the technology of the twenty-first century offers new avenues for historical research that utilises the archival legacy provided by popular magazines.

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