

Raising the Bar Sydney 2018

Megan Le Masurier – Magazines: dead or alive?

>> Welcome to the podcast series of Raising the Bar Sydney. Raising The Bar in 2018 saw 20 University of Sydney academics take their research out of the lecture theatre and into bars across Sydney, all on one night. In this podcast, you'll hear Megan Le Masurier's talk **Magazines: dead or alive? Enjoy the talk.**

[Applause]

Thanks. Thanks, Nicole. And thank you everybody for coming out on a drizzly Wednesday night. And they've let me out of the ivory tower to have a drink. I don't know if you guys watch Drunk History. Has anybody seen that? It's fantastic. So cheers. I don't think it's going to be that bad. I'm not that drunk, yet – yet. Okay. So what I'd like you to do to begin with is imagine you're walking into a mainstream news agent where there are lots of mainstream magazines.

Now traditionally and for centuries, magazines, they provide a mapping of our lives. Any particular part of usually everyday life, but politics, all kinds of things are there in a magazine. They're the most wonderful historical documents. But when you walk into traditional magazine stores, you get a very straight version of what our lives are in very straight kind of genres. So you have women usually on one side, men on the other. You have travel, food, celebrity, homes, gardens, sport, culture maybe, wellbeing, lifestyle. That lovely word.

News, current affairs, politics and something called special interest which is the industry category for the magazines that they can't work out where they go. Okay? But you may have noticed that you won't find Dolly there anymore. And you won't find Cleo there anymore. And as of today you won't find Cosmo there anymore. So things are not good in the world of mainstream magazine media, and that is actually the term now – magazine media – that the industry is using to describe itself. Because it's not just print.

And they had a lot of trouble and there was a lot of discussion. You know, what is a magazine now? We can get magazine material, magazine content digitally. They experimented with magazines as apps for a while. That was a big failure. But they made the same mistake that newspapers made, which was dumping a lot of content that was in their print version on screen that people could get very easily and not have to commit to the actual printed product. So at this point in time, there's a lot of confusion about digital strategies, the relationship between print and digital.

Advertisers have retreated. The last figures that came out actually last week are that ad spend for magazines is down 20%. That's not good, because that's how they make their money. The main publishers in Australia, Bower, News Life and Pac Mags, Pacific Magazines, pulled out of a very important organisation called the ABC, the Audit Bureau of Circulation. Now what this does is actually makes magazine sales transparent. It's an independent organisation that actually counts the number of sales each magazine has made. Yes, Fi? Oh, you're waving to somebody else. Oh, Hobey, hello.

[Laughter]

Sorry. Okay.

So the main magazine, people pulled out of getting this circulation tracked. So what that means, that's really an admission of failure, because they're scared because the figures are

going down. Okay? So all we're left with now to see what's going on in the mainstream industry is readership figures. Now, as I explained to my students, I don't know if Roy Morgan has ever knocked on your door. But he finally did knock on my door a few years ago. And of course I'm a magazine academic, so every magazine, he said, "Have you seen this?" and I said, "Yes, yes, yes, yes." So you know, I skewed the figures.

But basically you're considered a reader if you have picked up this magazine in a hairdresser's and kind of done that. That makes you a reader, so dodgy figures. Okay, so that's what we're left with, is dodgy figures in the mainstream. Okay, there are only 20 magazines left in Australia – and there are about 5,000-6,000 magazines out there – who bother to audit their sales now. And one of those, Frankly, which has been a success story in the magazine story since it started in 2004, this has started to decline as well. So it's had a – I've got the figure here. 5% drop each year for the last three years. Now, some magazines aren't doing too badly. Women's Weekly is still doing well. National Geographic is doing well. Gardening Australia is up by an extraordinary amount. There's a magazine called Home Design that I in fact hadn't seen that's up 68%.

But the most popular magazines are those free ones you get in the supermarket. You know, Cole's, Fresh, those kind of things. That's no surprise. They're free, you pick them up. Who knows what you do with them. Okay. So that's the general introduction to say mainstream magazine media is not dead, but many mainstream magazines are dying. Okay? And this has been a media format that has taken us through centuries, and as I said, has mapped our lives. We don't know where it's going. It's a time of flux.

Now I want you to imagine a different magazine store, okay? This is full of strange and beautiful niche magazines. They're very niche. I tend to call these magazine stores the alternative magazine universe. Every city, every major city in the world has a magazine store like this. And you walk in and it has the same kind of categories but they get very messed up. And what the magazines in these stores are doing is basically turning our expectations of those genres, those categories, the content on its head. These stores exist. There used to be one in Darling. It's just closed and gone online. Mag Nation exists in Melbourne.

There's a new one in Chippendale called Journals. There's one in Lisbon called Under the Covers. There's lots in England, Mag Culture in London, Mg Galleria in Barth. In Amsterdam, SNAM, the most fantastic indie magazine store. Do You Read Me in Berlin. And I've had the luxury over the last few years of actually hanging out at these places, talking to the owners and interviewing a lot of the people who make the magazines that fill up these stores. So the rest of the talk is going to be about this phenomenon, okay?

To begin with, I've got to make one thing clear. They're not zines. You know, if you go to a zine fair, you'll see this scruffy kind of homemade thing that some sad person did in their bedroom, you know? Like they're fine. They're fine, but that's not what I'm talking about. [Laughs] What I'm talking about is exquisitely designed magazines that challenge the mainstream but are designed to be bought. Zines aren't designed to be bought. These are usually more expensive than your normal magazines. And the makers have started to call them indies. A lot of names were floated around, but they've taken off in the last 15 years, okay? So what I want to do tonight is try to explain why this phenomenon has happened and it's happened globally.

So I've explained to you that mainstream print magazines are basically dying or just kind of you know, keeping their head above water. But this is a phenomenon that you wouldn't see and you wouldn't really know about unless you went to these magazine stores. But I've been researching this and collecting them for about ten years now. And the more I dig into it, the more I find. So it's a phenomenon not many people have written about certainly as academic.

So what I'm doing right now on long service leave is writing a book trying to explain this phenomenon. Okay. So I'm going to throw some ideas at you.

But what I'd really like from you is if you have any other explanations that I don't throw at you, I would love to hear it afterwards in question time. Okay. So let me start. I'm actually going to do show and tell now. And after I show each magazine, you can put up your hand if you're interested and you can have it and flip through it while I'm talking. Because I'd actually like a little bit of interactivity. So this obsession of mine started way back in 2006. I was at a café at my local beach which is DY. And there was a copy of this magazine called Monster Children. And I picked it up and I thought, "What is this? A surfing magazine?" You know, it's the northern beach. And it kind of was, but it was kind of a skate magazine, and then it was, you know some pictures of women.

And there's lots of advertising. And I thought, why would somebody do this now? Why would somebody bring out a print? And it started this question in my head. So this is Monster Children. Would anybody like to see it? Okay, I have my little scurriers here. They're going to scurry and take magazines for you. Okay. I'm going to go through a few. This is Frankly. All right, Frankly was the classic indie magazine. My friend Rebecca knows all about Frankly, don't you? It started basically on a kitchen table. Two women in Queensland just thought they hated what women's magazines were doing. So Frankly appeared.

It's kind of a bit mannerish, a bit crafty, but there's no celebrity. There's not really much fashion, or if it is, it's kind of indie/hipster fashion. It just did things that a young women's magazine wasn't doing and it became incredibly successful. So Frankly, anyone? Okay. Another Australian one that you may or may not know is called Dumbo Feather. This has been another very successful publication that's based in Melbourne now. Oh, what I meant to say about Frankly, okay – classic indie to start with, but the two women who started it then sold it to Morrison Media. So in my book, this is not indie anymore. My definition of indie is the makers are the chiefs. You keep your magazine. And if you don't, then you know, you're in niche mainstream territory. Okay.

Dumbo Feather is just full of Q and As with interesting people. That's it. And it's a really successful formula. It's gotten a bit spiritual lately, but yes, you would like Dumbo Feather. Okay. Great, this is working. This is good. Okay. I'll stay with women's magazines. This is one called Riposte which is from London. Unusual cover. It's usually just words or it has an image that you don't usually see on women's magazines. No fashion, no celebrity. Again, just really interesting journalism about things that women might be interested in. Ah, Louise's hand was up first. You've got to – you're getting your exercise, aren't you?

All right. Girls Like Us. Now, this is an interesting magazine made from Amsterdam. And Lucy and I both actually talked to the makers of this magazine two years ago. Girls Like Us just takes – it's got a very different take on what it is to be a woman. So there's issues of sexuality, issues of identity. And it's been going for a long time. And this again is not something you would expect to see. You would like that? Okay. Nicole, thank you. All right.

And here I have Archer Magazine. Now Archer is a magazine based in Melbourne, but my student Lucy is going to tell you because she edits it. Lucy is going to tell you about Archer.

Okay, so I'm the online editor of Archer. We publish twice a year. It's a magazine about diverse expressions of sex, gender and sexuality. So we have this. This issue that I'm holding up is the they/theirs issue. So every writer in this issue is someone that uses they/theirs pronouns, a nonbinary person. So that's it in all its glory, diversity, gender and sexuality.

Okay, great. Would anybody like to see this? Yes, there we go. Okay. Here's another one. Look, this is the thing. I could stand here until tomorrow and go through every magazine, but

I've got a collection, but I'm a bit into the women's ones at the moment. This is a magazine called Lady Beard. It's from London. It's a feminist-inspired young women's magazine. The girls behind it are just fantastic. And this – can anybody tell me what that image is on the cover? It's a famed issue. It's called Beauty. Say it.

>> A vulva.

>> It's a buttole.

>> That's right, it's a buttole.

[Laughter]

Okay, so themes is something else the indies do. Now the reason they use themes for their issues is because they actually have escaped from the news cycle. The news cycle tends to determine what journalists do. But if you were doing a biannual or a quarterly or even an annual magazine, you have to work out a different approach to your editorial. You know, how do you decide what to put in there? So timeliness is not the thing. So for them, they're critiquing beauty here. It's a really interesting magazine.

But also very, very beautiful. Lucy, you would like to see that. Okay, all right. So in our mainstream news agent, you'll have a section called wellbeing. In our indie magazine store, you will also have a section that's to do with health and wellbeing, but you'll come across a magazine like this called Angsty. Angsty is made by two women based in Berlin and San Francisco.

And it's about mental health. But it's not about how to cure yourself. It's just stories of people and what they're going through, all right? And this is really interesting. And again, they have themes, so this is about anger. All right, so everybody contributing here is talking about their experiences of anger. Anyone want this one? Nope? Okay.

Apartmento. This is from Barcelona. This was my favourite magazine for quite some time. In our mainstream news agents, you'll have the home magazines. Now have you ever noticed that there aren't many people in those magazines? Yeah. You know, you look at the images and everything is styled to within an inch of its life and they tell you what to buy. And you look at these beautiful homes, and the you go to your own home and there's dirty washing and the bed's not made and you know, you've got dust and stuff.

This magazine is about everyday life, all right? So real people in their homes. But interesting people. We get pictures of their unmade beds, them with their dogs, you know, them doing the washing up, and them talking about their lives. This has been an incredible success, by the way. Okay, so Apartmento?

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>> Okay. Another mainstream category would be nature. This is a magazine called Cyrene which comes from Milan. Now Cyrene is all about the ocean and just loving the ocean. And when I talk in a little while about materiality, I'd like you to notice this. This magazine is made from paper that's recycled paper that's made from algae. Okay? So you actually get the feel and the sense of the ocean when you're actually reading it. Here you go.

Okay. Gardens. Again, you know, this is not ten ways to grow your roses or you know, what to plant this season. Rake's Progress comes from London and it's just exquisite photography and stories about gardeners and gardens. This is just a beautiful thing. All right.

We're in our travel section now. And this is now my favourite magazine. Flaneau comes from Berlin. And the team behind it came up with this brilliant idea. So instead of telling you, you

know, top ten holiday destinations and where to spend your money in Malaysia or whatever, they choose a city, they go to the city and they become flaneurs. They walk. And after a few weeks, they choose a street. And then they spend three months at least hanging out on that street talking to people who live on the street, historians who know about the street, and this entire publication is about one street. And this is going Gangbusters. This is doing really well. Okay.

At some point I'm going to stop doing this. Talk about niche. This is called MC1R, a magazine for redheads. And it comes out of [laughs] – it comes out of Germany. And the guy behind it, you know, it's doing well too. I find it extraordinary to think you could keep a magazine going that's just about redheads. But he's been going for a few years and we'll see. He's obviously got a niche captured market. If you're a redhead, you probably want to buy that. Okay, I might stop. No. One more. A few more.

In our mainstream magazine shop, we have the celebrity magazines. They're dying off for obvious reasons because you can get that info quickly and online and you know, you don't really need it. Accent is about people, but it's about ordinary people who have extraordinary stories to tell. So they're not celebrities. This is an anti-celebrity magazine about ordinary people, made by some girls in London.

The Outpost which has stopped now, but I interviewed the guy behind this, Ibrahim, when I was in Hamburg. He was trying to change the narrative on the Middle East. So it's a magazine based in Lebanon. Again, very beautiful and it's based on the question that he says, "What if?" What if we could have dinner in Gaza? What if?

So it's very political but also you know, everyday cultural as well. An interesting magazine. He's now making a dance magazine, so I'm not sure what he's up to.

Delayed Gratification. This actually was one of the magazines that started me on this journey. This is a news magazine that calls itself slow journalism and its tagline is "Last to breaking news." So the editors in London who are behind this go through the news of the last three months, decide what really mattered and then commissioned people to write really detailed, interesting articles about it. Slowing down our news time. I saw Rob Borchard in London a few months ago and he said to me they are now making a profit. He doesn't have to have another job, so it's a sustainable business.

All right, I might stop there or my talk will be over before I've really started. So you've got a sense of what these magazines are about and you can ask me questions afterwards. But while you're sipping on your drinks and having a flick through the magazines, I just want to quickly go through my theories about why I think this is happening. Because everyone was saying that print was meant to be dead. You know, it was only a few years ago that we thought everything was going to go online.

And that certainly disrupted the mainstream magazine industry, but it's not what's happening. So why is this happening? And here I am in a vinyl store. Why is this happening? I think it's part of the same phenomenon. One of the reasons I think is because we can. The technology is there for people to be able to make a magazine. If you know the software, InDesign, if you have access to a printer who will work with you on small print runs, you can do this. You know, it's not genius. People have been making magazines for centuries. It's not that hard, Louise, is it? No. It's not.

So that's one of the reasons why: we can. All right? So it's about digital affordances to allow people to make print, which is what I think is interesting. It's not an anti-digital, which these records may be. It's actually using what the digital can afford us to make beautiful printed objects to be able to express yourself. One of my terms for these magazines is slow

magazines. Because I think there's an issue of temporality at stake here. And when I interviewed the makers of these magazines, all of them said to me they were sick of living their lives on screen.

They were sick at the speed at which information was coming at them. And they were sick of the infinity of the internet, all right? The internet never stops. And there is something about a magazine that I think speaks to almost a narrative need, you know? It has a beginning, a middle and an end. It is this curated, carefully considered thing. And you can have an experience of its totality. And it's also something that sits there on your coffee table and you can go back to it. Whereas – and I know you've done this and I've spent my life doing this – bookmarking webpages. "I'll go back to that. Yeah, I'll read that." And you just don't, you know? You don't. My desktop is just full of all of that stuff.

Whereas this is beautiful and encourages you to come back. So that's one of the reasons I think it's happening, is this response to an incredibly fast information overload environment that we're in at the moment. And as I said, most of the makers of these magazines are young, you know? So there's not old fogies like me going, "Oh." You know, it's young people who are doing this, okay?

And that leads me I think to materiality. There is something we lose on a screen. You can't feel it, you can't touch it, you can't smell it. And I think this issue of the material object has become terribly important as well. These magazines are sold at quite high prices, but they're collectable. So they actually have an existence and they attract a time of your life. So if you're into Benji Newman for example for a particular period, it's there. It's not just there as a bookmarked page on your computer. Benji Newman by the way takes me to something else which is editorially. That's an academic word.

The line of thinking for the last 10-15 years or so was the death of the gatekeeper. Isn't the internet wonderful? You're in control now. You can find whatever you like. You just have to decide what you want to know and the internet will tell you. What the makers were telling me is that they're sick of that. And the readers said similar things. And they said, "What we really want to do is be an editor and we want to read something that an editor has carefully considered for us." And I think that desire is something that kind of disappeared for a while, but I think it's coming back. And this idea of being an editor, Benji Newman is a really good example. So this magazine comes from Latvia. Benji Newman doesn't exist.

Benji Newman is a fictional character dreamt up by the editor, but she calls herself Benji Newman, all right? So it's a conceit. And what she does is take you through the life of Benji Newman, the perfect day or the perfect week. So you know, who he meets, what he does, where he is, that kind of thing. It's a really curious magazine, but in English. All of these magazines by the way are in English. Okay, so editorially.

Look, the other thing I want to say about this too is this idea of curation. It's a really overused word, but I'll point to my young friends here. You curate your lives on Instagram and I've seen it, yeah? So you know, you're making editorial decisions on social media. But it disappears. When you edit a magazine, it has finitude. It stays there with you. So it's that desire, and I think it might almost be a social media desire of making your mark, defining your identity, curating your life. But here we have it in a permanent form. So I think there's something there.

I'm writing a book on this at the moment, so you know, I'm not sure about everything. But I think there's something there. Right. Oh, here I've got a very academic phrase for what that is. I'm calling it a temporal remediation of social media curatorial practice. [Groan] Yes, it's horrible isn't it? Yeah. Okay.

The other thing that's at stake here I think is community. You know, we all have community in our social media lives, but you know, we don't actually meet anybody. The thing that's lovely about these magazines is that they're very centred on real-life events. Every launch has got you know, some big thing happening. The magazine stores host the launches. They do conferences. The indie magazine people have a festival every year in Hamburg called Indie Con that I spoke at last year.

And again, this is an interesting thing, you know? So we're coming out from behind our screens to actually engage. So that's something going on as well.

>> You haven't included Monocle.

>> Oh, do you want me to talk about Monocle for a minute?

>> I'm just interested. Because I've seen it across industries, but I don't really know very much.

>> Yeah. Okay. Yeah. Yeah. No, no, no, it's interesting. Look, if you don't know Monocle, it's Tyler Brule's magazine, incredibly successful. It's a multimedia empire now.

He has cafes, he has shops, he has a radio station. And he has this magazine that kind of speaks globally to people about culture and stuff and cities. Look, in my book I am going to talk about Monocle. But to me it's not quite indie even though he still owns it, because apparently he has had huge investment from outside. And if my definition is right for an indie, that the makers are the chiefs, he can't possibly keep an eye on everything that's going down. So I just think it's gone a little bit too big.

But another example of that would be a magazine like Dazed and Confused. You know, started in the '90s as a classic indie and is now a multimedia. It's called Daze, Daze Media. The guy behind it, Jefferson Hack defiantly says, "This is independent and we don't compromise." But he's the head of this huge thing. So that's a borderline, and it's a great question because I haven't quite answered that yet. Where does indie stop and where does it actually become kind of niche mainstream? I'm not quite sure.

But thank you for that. So I'm getting a bit better now about trying to explain this cultural phenomenon of indies in print. And part of this has to do with neoliberalism, I think. The young makers of these magazines have grown up in an environment where they're basically told, "You've got to do it yourself." There are no social structures to support you. If you don't do it, you fail. And why don't you be an entrepreneur? You know, that's another thing.

Universities now teach this. In our department we're resisting teaching media entrepreneurship. That's a hard word to say. But if we did, I hope we would critique it. It just seems too easy. You see, this is interesting. So you've got young people who want to work in the creative industries where there aren't terribly many jobs. If they do have these jobs, they're working in the gig economy, right? So they have a short-term thing here, another short-term thing there. They don't have any of the kind of sick leave or holiday pay or this sense of a long-term job that's going to look after them. They're on their own.

And when I spoke to the girls from Mosh Pit which is one of the young feminist magazines, I was actually talking about these ideas. They're really smart young women. And they said to me, "What are we meant to do though? We can't get full-time jobs. We love magazines. We want to critique the society we're in, so we are going to do it ourselves." And they said to me, "You're fucked if you do and you're fucked if you don't." And I thought, "Yeah, okay, I understand that."

But I think there is something about this do it yourself, do it with others, be creative that ties into the particular political economic context we're in now of neoliberalism. So that's certainly

going to be a chapter in the book. Okay, and at that point, I think that's as many possible reasons I can think of for why this phenomenon is happening. But if anybody has an idea or a comment or a question, please –

[Applause]

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