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Life-spans of *Library Journal*'s "Best Magazines of the Year"

Introduction

By definition, a periodical is "a serial appearing or intended to appear indefinitely at regular or stated intervals."¹ As every librarian who works with magazines and journals knows, publishers' intent to publish indefinitely does not always match reality. Periodicals cease publication, sometimes with a clear notice from the publisher, but oftentimes they stop with no warning. The failure rate of new magazines has been estimated to be around ninety percent.² Many failures occur within the first few years of publication, but long running magazines also go under. The purpose of this study is to describe the life-spans of the periodicals chosen by *Library Journal* as the best new magazines of the year from 1986-2006. While this sample may not represent all magazines, it does comprise a sample of new periodicals that could reasonably be expected to be acquired by libraries.

History of *LJ*'s annual "Best New Magazines of the Year"

Bill Katz, founding editor of *Magazines for Libraries* and the magazines column editor for *Library Journal* from 1976 until 1993 inaugurated what became an annual article on the best new magazines of the year with "Magazine Madness: the Best Magazines of 1986 & 1987."³ In his erudite, discursive, and entertainingly opinionated style, Katz described and critiqued twenty-four newly launched magazines in that first article. He opened with an acerbic commentary in popular taste in magazines, followed by a quick summary of the usual criteria by which librarians select periodicals and used in *Magazines for Libraries*. Noting the limitations of such objective criteria, Katz stated, "Any librarian who is a constant reader of magazines and has a dash of good taste can easily separate out the good from the bad and the indifferent."⁴ That, to

this day, neatly encapsulates the selection criteria of the best new magazines of the year, the “dash of good taste” being entrusted to *Library Journal*’s current magazines columnist.

Katz authored the next five “best of” features, dropping the “Magazine Madness” theme in 1990, and raising the “best of” subtitle to top billing. In 1990 the list was defined as the best ten new launches of the previous year, a convention kept fairly consistently to the present day. Katz’s articles were the longest in the history of the feature, and the only ones written in an essay format. Katz had a somewhat rambling style, so for clarity callout boxes listed which of the many titles he mentioned were actually selected as the best new magazines of the year. A fifth of Katz’s choices were scholarly journals. As exemplified in the title of his *Magazines for Libraries*, which includes many scholarly journals, he considered popular magazines and scholarly journals together as varieties of periodicals. He never had much interest in parsing what was scholarly or not,⁵ and thus had no hesitation to include scholarly journals in the annual feature.

Eric Bryant, an assistant editor at *Library Journal*, co-authored with Katz “The 10 Best Magazines of 1993.”⁶ This article introduced the two part format of a discussion of the magazine market and highlights of the year, followed by ten selections each reviewed in a few hundred words. While the length of the introductory discussion has varied over the years, the discussion-plus-reviews format begun in 1993 has continued to the present, as has the tradition of publishing the feature in May. Bryant, sole author of the feature 1994-1998, had a comparatively terse style, and placed more emphasis on factual description and intended audience. Introductions were very short with little on the market context in which the new magazines were being published. Bryant chose significantly fewer scholarly journals, only five in his six years of selecting the best new magazines of the year.

Michael Colford, a Head of Technical Services and then Assistant Director at two public libraries in Massachusetts, took over as author of *Library Journal's* magazines columns and "Best of" feature in 1999. He authored the feature through 2003, offering readers more information about the broad context of magazine publishing. By this time *LJ* had chosen a limit of two pages for the annual article on best new magazines of the year, so the word count for discussion of the magazine market was limited (and remains so to the present). Colford chose two scholarly journals in his four years, both in 2001.

Librarian and poet Clayton Couch was the next author, penning the two page article on best new magazines from 2004 to 2006. His articles expanded the introduction and employed shorter reviews to keep the article to two pages. Couch cited sources of information in his introductions, a departure from past "Best of" features. He chose no scholarly journals.

The author of this article wrote the best magazines articles in 2007 and 2008, and is currently author of *Library Journal's* online magazine reviews. The impetus for this study came from the author's observation that several magazines deemed worth adding to library collections (at least according to my "dash of good taste") failed in short order. Particularly striking was *Everywhere*, a magazine launched in 2008 that I found interesting, visually stimulating, and ingeniously produced. But it failed before the "Best of 2008" could be written for the May 2009 issue.

Magazine Failures

Magazines are launched with enthusiasm, sometimes by large publishers with multi-million dollar budgets, but perhaps with little more than a home computer and a starry-eyed vision. Business models vary widely, but to survive a magazine must sustain high quality

content, effectively manage its finances, production, and distribution, and attract readers. Of course more detailed descriptions of the reasons for success or failure have been written. Chilson describes five reasons why new magazines fail, all of which involve publishers' lack of experience in the magazine publishing business.⁷ Buss writes of ten reasons that include poor quality of editing and writing, lack of funding, poor distribution, and inability to connect with readers.⁸

While one may associate high rates of failure with fly-by-night little magazines or vanity publications, large publishers with deep pockets and experienced teams launch failures, too. Conde Nast's *Portfolio* was launched with great fanfare and expense in 2008, but weak editorial content and failure to find an audience doomed it to a short life. Conversely, intelligent, creative people with a vision but with both feet on the ground can and do find success in unlikely places. Recently launched magazines like *Brick Journal* and *Meatpaper* are off to strong starts, because they are well edited, have a workable business models not based on debt, and contain good writing appropriate to their intended audiences.

Surprisingly little data has been published on failure rates of magazines. Standard sources of data for serials do not always record when (or even whether) they have ceased. As will be discussed below, magazines may cease without records indicating so in OCLC, EBSCO's *Serials Directory*, or *Ulrich's Periodicals Directory*. Even if records were always accurate, no sharply defined line separates magazines from other serials, so it is difficult or impossible to separate out data for magazines from that of scholarly journals, trade journals, serially published government documents, newsletters, and so forth.

A further complication is that potential data sources for determining failure rates are imperfect. Dr. Samir Husni, the self-styled "Mr. Magazine," reports a 90% failure rate overall,

and a 50% failure rate within the first year of publication.⁹ But what Dr. Husni counts as magazines aren't necessarily all periodicals. Many of the titles he includes are one-off publications librarians would probably not interpret as being intended to be published indefinitely.

A potentially rich source of cessation data is *Magazines for Libraries*. Beginning with its twelfth edition, *Magazines for Libraries* lists titles removed since the last edition. But this data is difficult to use to calculate failure rates because deletion can be due for reasons other than the periodical ceasing.¹⁰ Besides, cessation data from *Magazines for Libraries* would be skewed, because very short-lived magazines are by their nature underrepresented in a selective reference work that judges the quality of periodicals. On top of the aforementioned problems is the fact that many magazines never receive an ISSN, are never cataloged by a library, are never included in EBSCO's *Serials Directory* or Ulrich's *Periodicals Directory*, or never make it into serials vendors' databases. Thus the actual number of new magazines is literally countless. It is impossible to randomly sample magazines because it is not possible to accurately list all the members of the population of magazines.

So while it would be very interesting to compare the life-spans of *LJ*'s "best of" with life-spans of all magazines, reliable data on the reference group is not published. While imperfect, Husni's 90% failure rate overall and 50% failure within the first year stand as the best figures available for the overall failure rates of magazines.

Method

The primary research objective is to describe the life-spans of periodicals listed as the best new magazines of the year in *Library Journal*. A secondary objective is to identify any characteristics that correlate with life-spans. The research sample is the 224 magazines identified

in *Library Journal* from 1986 to 2006 as the best new magazines of the year. This sample is not representative of all magazines in any statistical sense. That is, it is not known whether these “best of” magazines mirror the characteristics of all magazines. However, the sample does include many of the irregularities so well known to serials librarians, including titles with no ISSN, no record in OCLC, unusual formats (e.g. *Psychology* on BITNET, *Verb* on audio CD), newsstand-only titles, and a free supplement that couldn’t be separately purchased (*Liber*, an insert in *TLS*). Perhaps uncharacteristically for magazines, though, the sample includes only a few title changes and mergers, and no splits. Library holdings in OCLC range from zero for six titles to 3244 libraries holding *Ms*. Prices range from free (four titles) to a maximum of \$390, with only six titles equal to or over \$100, reflecting both the relatively low cost of magazines versus journals and the fact that more scholarly journals were selected in the early years when Katz authored the feature.

A spreadsheet was created with columns for title, ISSN, start date, frequency, price in launch year, end date, and the number of holding libraries in WorldCat as of May 2009. The *Library Journal* articles contained title, start date, frequency, and price. As only a few of the articles published the magazines’ ISSNs, most were recorded from WorldCat along with end dates if given, and number of holding libraries. It quickly became apparent that many magazines cease without the OCLC records reflecting an end date. The author determined that a title had ceased when all three of these conditions were met: no contact information for the publisher was available in EBSCO or Ulrich’s databases, either URLs were dead for the magazine and/or publisher or the publisher’s site stated the magazine was no longer available, and no library with WorldCat holdings and a catalog on the internet displayed receipt of current issues. To measure the frequency of unrecorded cessation, columns were added to the spreadsheet for the source(s)

of end dates and a yes/no column for whether an end date was recorded in the OCLC record. The final column was years in publication, calculated by subtracted the launch date from the end date (end date was entered as 9999 if the magazine is currently published).

Magazines that appear to have ceased, but do not have end dates in MARC 008 or MARC 362 were checked in several places to determine the last issue published. The main sources used to look for end dates were the EBSCOnet customer database, Ulrich's *Periodicals Directory*, and publishers' web sites. In a few cases end dates were inferred from libraries' holdings, and in two cases end dates were confirmed by communicating with former editors. Despite all these efforts, some end dates were not able to be determined from any of the aforementioned sources. Some titles with unknown end dates were listed in EBSCO as "unable to contact publisher," or in Ulrich's as "status: researched/unresolved." In many cases only one or neither database had information about cessation. So it is possible that some titles counted as ceased for this study may return from the dead. Finally, this being serials work, a few of the titles with incomplete OCLC records fell into gray areas between "active" and "ceased." The author used his best judgment based on familiarity with CONSER cataloging rules to determine in these cases whether mergers, gaps in publication, or changes in format constituted cessation of the title originally selected as one of the best of new magazines of the year.

Results

Life-spans for the 224 titles selected by the authors of *Library Journal* as the best new magazines of the year from 1986 through 2006 are represented in Figure 1.

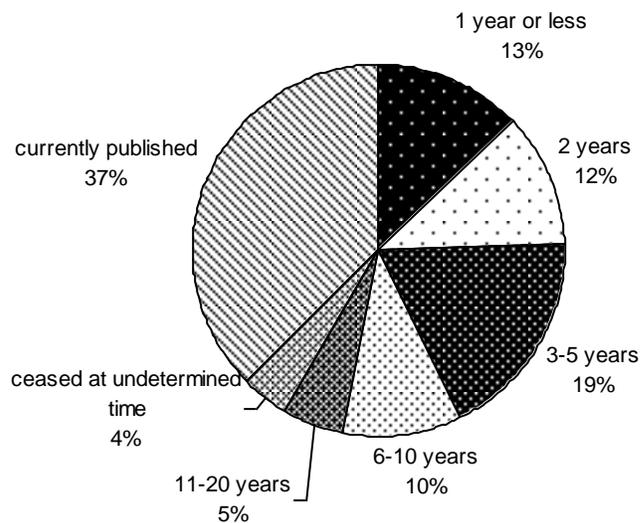


Figure 1: Life Spans of “Best of Year”

The data are a little skewed towards “currently published” because they include magazines launched as recently as 2006. The life-spans for the 37% currently published range from 2 to 22 years. The rate of failure for this sample is lower than the rates reported by Husni. Thirteen percent failed in their first year, compared to Husni’s estimate of 50%. The thirty-seven percent still in publication is better the 10% estimated by Husni. But since some portion of the currently published titles can be expected to fail in future years, the success rate will fall over time.

Figure 2 shows failure rates for each year the best new magazines were launched, with a cutoff of 2003 to include only those magazines with a potential of at least five years of publication.

Figure 2: Life-spans of Magazines Launched 1986-2003

Year	% current	% failed ≤ 5 years
1986	46	15
1987	19	38
1988	18	45
1989	21	43
1990	50	10
1991	11	44
1992	55	27
1993	50	30
1994	30	50
1995	13	50
1996	28	36
1997	40	60
1998	40	50
1999	40	60
2000	44	56
2001	55	45
2002	40	60
2003	30	70

Percentages are not all in multiples of ten because the number of titles chosen varied before 1990, and because some start dates as listed in OCLC vary from the year the magazine was listed in *Library Journal*. A general trend can be seen of more titles still currently published as launch dates are closer to the present. This is expected, as the longer a title is published, the more years it has an opportunity to fail. But this trend is uneven and less pronounced than one might expect. For example, the 46% of titles launched in 1986 is a higher portion of titles still published than all but one year since 1994. A more pronounced trend is seen in the percentage of magazines that failed within five years. From 1986 to 1994, an average of 34% of the magazines failed within five years. From 1994 to 2003, 54% failed within five years.

Do particular characteristics correlate with short life-spans? To determine this, Pearson's r correlation coefficients for the life-spans of titles that have ceased were calculated against the frequency of publication, price at time of launch, and the number of libraries that list the title as a

holding in 2009. The correlation between life-span and frequency is very weak, $r = -0.08$, suggesting that titles with fewer issues published per year lived slightly longer, but not significantly so. The correlation between price and life-span was even weaker, $r = -0.01$, which is effectively no relationship. The number of libraries holding a magazine has a moderate correlation with years in publication among the failed titles, $r = 0.45$.

WorldCat records show that twenty-seven of the magazines have no ISSN listed in MARC 022. Of these twenty-seven, 9 failed within one year, and 5 others failed at an unknown date. Four have zero library holdings. Not getting an ISSN for a magazine does not cause it to cease, but this data suggests that a failure to get an ISSN is indicative of publisher practices that result in short life-spans for new magazines.

Research projects often raise new questions that were not anticipated at the start. This project revealed that a significant number of records in OCLC show no end date in MARC 008 or 362 for ceased magazines. As mentioned above, further investigation revealed that end dates for titles no longer published may not be recorded in any source, including the EBSCO *Serials Directory* and Ulrich's *Periodicals Directory*. Sometimes there are notes in those databases to the effect that an end date has been sought but cannot be found, and sometimes no information is given at all. Of the 224 magazines in this study, 140 have ceased. Of those, 42 have OCLC records lacking end dates in MARC 008 or 362, meaning that 30% of the bibliographic records for the ceased magazines in this study have not been properly closed.

Discussion

The most obvious conclusion from this study is that just because the magazine columnist for *Library Journal* believes a new title is of high quality does not mean it will have a long life. The best new magazines of the year may fail at a slower pace than the average described by

Husni, but a substantial number of them still fail. These data suggest that the rate of failure within the first five years has increased since the mid 1990's. Beyond that, no conclusions regarding overall life-spans of magazines can be drawn from this study, as it is unknown how well this sample reflects the whole market of new magazines. The results of this study provide results against which other samples of magazines may be compared.

This modest project suggests a need for further study to address two questions. The first is, "How do the failure rates of *Library Journal's* 'Best New Magazines of the Year' compare with failure rates of other samples of periodicals?" As described above, a principal difficulty in answering this question for all magazines lies in identifying the members of the population. From a practical standpoint, further studies to determine overall failure rates would have to incorporate reasonable and workable parameters to define manageable groups of periodicals. If enough such studies are conducted, a meta-analysis could then quantify periodicals' life-spans with reasonable accuracy.

A second question might be, "How frequently do bibliographic records in OCLC fail to reflect end dates of ceased periodicals?" Further study might also investigate the reasons why this occurs. It may be that lack of end dates in OCLC records is a low priority problem among the many challenges serials librarians face, but quantifying the scope of the problem could help people decide whether additional effort should be spent on the issue.

Taking a step back to look at the big picture, this study highlights the relative rarity of high quality magazines that are able to not only create and sustain good content and attract readers year after year, but are also able to continue a successful business model in the face of the internet and other challenges. Editors, writers, photographers, graphic designers, and all the other people who work to publish these outstanding periodicals deserve the respect and

admiration of librarians and the patrons we serve. Appendix 1 lists the most successful of the 224 “Best New Magazines of the Year,” adding to commercial success the criterion that at least 100 libraries have selected it for their collections.

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Appendix 1:
 Successful and Widely Held *Library Journal* “Best New Magazines,” 1986-2003

These periodicals are currently published, have been published at least 5 years, and are held by at least 100 libraries

Title	ISSN	Launch date	OCLC holding libraries
<i>Ms.</i>	0047-8318	1990	3244
<i>Wired</i>	1059-1028	1993	2462
<i>O, The Oprah Magazine</i>	1531-3247	2000	1695
<i>Journal of Economic Perspectives</i>	0895-3309	1987	1605
<i>Ladybug</i>	1051-4961	1990	1380
<i>This Old House</i>	1086-2633	1995	1220
<i>Real Simple</i>	1528-1701	2000	1144
<i>MultiCultural Review</i>	1058-9236	1991	768
<i>Calliope</i>	1050-7086	1990	650
<i>Latina</i>	1099-890X	1996	648
<i>Hypatia</i>	0887-5367	1986	634
<i>Tikkun</i>	0887-9982	1986	620
<i>Victoria</i>	1040-6883	1987	566
<i>National Geographic Adventure</i>	1523-6226	1999	525
<i>University Business</i>	1097-6671	1997	506
<i>Dwell</i>	1530-5309	2000	502
<i>Week</i>	1533-1804	2001	491
<i>Bookmarks</i>	1546-0657	2002	464
<i>Bottom Line</i>	0888-045X	1986	461
<i>Black Issues Book Review</i>	1522-0524	1998	460
<i>Men's Journal</i>	1063-4657	1993	426
<i>ElleDecor</i>	1046-1957	1989	415
<i>Mental Floss: Feel Smart Again</i>	1543-4702	2001	400
<i>Birder's World</i>	0895-495X	1987	310
<i>Out</i>	1062-7928	1992	303
<i>Common Knowledge</i>	0961-754X	1992	267
<i>Social Politics</i>	1072-4745	1994	247
<i>Social History of Medicine</i>	0951-631X	1988	240
<i>BBC Music Magazine</i>	0966-7180	1992	237
<i>Skeptic</i>	1063-9330	1993	225
<i>Organic Style</i>	1530-7824	2001	223
<i>Women: A Cultural Review</i>	0957-4042	1990	202
<i>European Legacy</i>	1084-8770	1996	198
<i>Journal of Information Ethics</i>	1061-9321	1992	198
<i>Contexts</i>	1536-5042	2002	193
<i>Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire</i>	1089-3148	1996	192
<i>International Journal of Intelligence and</i>	0885-0607	1986	178

<i>Counterintelligence</i>			
<i>Performance Research</i>	1352-8165	1997	169
<i>Hand Papermaking</i>	0887-1418	1986	165
<i>Cabinet</i>	1531-1430	2000	159
<i>Glas: New Russian Writing</i>	0869-3102	1992	158
<i>Gastronomics: The Journal of Food and Culture</i>	1529-3262	2001	155
<i>Studies in the Decorative Arts</i>	1069-8825	1993	154
<i>Back Home</i>	1051-323X	1990	150
<i>Tin House</i>	1541-521X	1999	137
<i>Boulevard</i>	0885-9337	1986	120
<i>Critical Survey</i>	0011-1570	1989	120
<i>MAMM</i>	1099-5633	1997	114
<i>Cure: Cancer, Updates, Research & Education</i>	1534-7664	2002	111