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Failure Rates and Publication Status: Periodicals Reviewed in *Library Journal* (1980-2005) and Database Accuracy

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

Abstract

An annual column published in *Library Journal* reviews the best new magazines of the previous year. Despite being chosen for their quality, a portion of them fail at a rate described in this study. Reasons for failure and characteristics of ceased titles are described, as are difficulties in determining end dates from records in OCLC, *Ulrich's* and the *Serials Directory*. This study reveals that OCLC records had not been closed for thirty percent of the ceased periodicals. A list of successful and widely held "best of" magazines is appended.

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 (LJ)* 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. This study will briefly summarize twenty years of the *LJ* feature on best new magazines, address reasons why magazines fail, then describe the failure rate of the new magazines chosen by *LJ* as the best of the year.

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 through 1994 inaugurated what became an annual article on the best new magazines 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.⁴ 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.”⁵ 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,⁶ and thus did not hesitate 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.”⁷ 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, both in 2001, in his four years authoring the best new magazines column.

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 fit the word count within 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 study 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" was written for the May 2009 issue.

Magazine Failures

Magazines are launched with enthusiasm, sometimes by large publishers with multi-million dollar budgets, but sometimes by individuals 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, attract readers, and effectively manage its finances, production, and distribution. 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.⁸ Buss writes of ten reasons that include poor quality of editing and writing, lack of funding, poor distribution, and inability to connect with readers.⁹

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 uneven editorial content, failure to find a large enough audience and insufficient advertising sales 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

sustainable business models not hampered by excessive debt, and contain good writing appropriate to their intended audiences.

Regardless of the reasons that lead to failure, published data on actual rates of failure is surprisingly rare. 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 International Periodicals Directory*. A careful search of the *Library and Information Science Abstracts* database revealed only one research article on magazine failures. It counts the number of new magazines launched 1985-2000 still in publication in 2002.¹⁰ The article is co-authored by Dr. Samir Husni, the self-styled "Mr. Magazine," who reports a 90% failure rate overall, and a 50% failure rate within the first year of publication.¹¹ 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 removal can be due for reasons other than the periodical ceasing.¹¹ Besides, cessation data from *Magazines for Libraries* would be skewed because very short-lived magazines are by their nature underrepresented in a reference work intended to select only high quality 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 even 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 most of the scholarly journals selected were published in the early years when Katz authored the "best of" article.

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. Start dates were verified in OCLC, and OCLC dates were chosen if the launch date varied from the year shown in the *LJ* article. 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 a best new magazine 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.

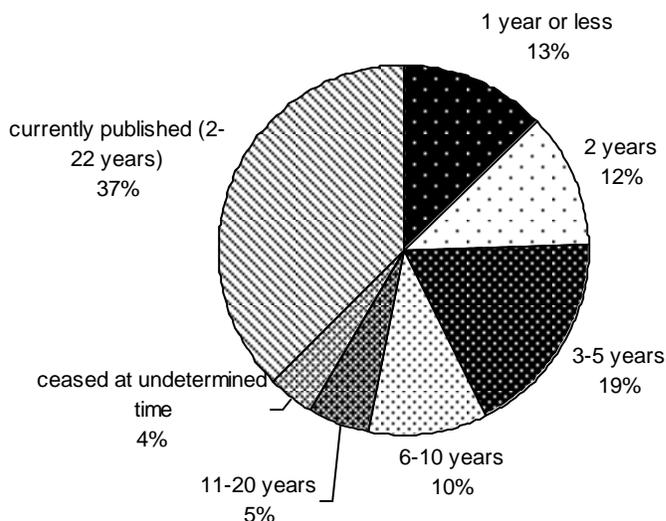


Figure 1: Life Spans of “Best of Year”

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 than 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. (insert Figure 2) Percentages are not all in multiples of ten because the number of titles chosen varied before 1990 (when ten per year became standard) 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 approach 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, 46% of titles launched in 1986 are still published. This is a higher portion 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 average price of the 224 titles in this study was \$30.90, with no discernable trend in prices from 1986-2006. Unlike scholarly journals, the subscription prices of magazines have remained remarkably stable over the last few decades.¹² 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 the twenty-seven with no ISSN, nine (33%) failed within one year, and five (19%) failed at a date not recorded in OCLC, EBSCO, or Ulrich's. Of the one hundred ninety-six with an ISSN, nineteen (10%) failed within one year, and four (2%) failed at an unrecorded date. Among the titles with no ISSN, four (15%) have zero library holdings, while all but two (1%) with ISSN are held by at least one library. 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, and that lack of an ISSN may discourage libraries from subscribing.

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 International Periodicals Directory*. Sometimes notes in EBSCO or *Ulrich's* databases indicate that an end date has been sought but cannot be found, but sometimes no information is given at all. Of the 224 magazines in this study, 140 have ceased. As of May 2009, 42 of the ceased magazines' OCLC records lacked end dates in MARC 008 or 362. In

other words, 30% of the bibliographic records for the ceased magazines in this study had not been 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 describe life-spans for this particular set of magazines, which provides data against which life-spans of other 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 might 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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