

# Magazines – the culture of America in the 20th century

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## Abstract

*The variety of magazines' amusement, information, and ideas was one of the 20th century's most peculiar aspects. The organizational framework of the magazine industry enabled new publications to appear as freely as they had in the first 55 years of the century. Magazines as a whole reflected a varied range of preferences and perspectives due to the fact that they catered to particular audiences within the general community creating a culture within the general collective.*

**Keywords:** *magazines, USA, 20th century, culture, entertainment*



## 1. Introduction

A magazine is a periodic publication with different types of content that is published on a regular timetable. Almost all publications may be grouped into one of three genres when it comes to the many magazine types: consumer magazines, trade magazines, and organization magazines. Of course, there are other subcategories to divide each category into.[1]

Nowadays, magazines have an assortment of sections. You can find them either printed or online, but in this digital age, magazines aren't the only source of information or personal entertainment.

But 'the age of gold' for magazines was actually in the 20th century. The modern journal, of all the mass media of transmission, has perhaps been the least subjected to serious research. One of the significant gaps in knowledge about the American magazine is its history from the 20th century, the period of its most accelerated development and greatest importance.[10] At that time, America was so moved by this phenomenon so a modern way of entertainment, information and culture was born and the American society was forever moved by it

## 2. Understanding how the American magazine industry worked before the 20th century

The first American magazine was born in 1741. It was said that the first magazine of American colonies was envisioned by Benjamin Franklin, – “The general magazine, and Historical Chronicle, For All the Plantations in America”, unfortunately it was published only 6 times. There were others like “General magazine and Historical Chronicle. *The Pennsylvania Magazine*” edited by Thomas Paine. This magazine only ran for a short time but was an influential publication during the Revolutionary War like pretty much any other at the time. [3] Another substantial magazine with the exact same destiny as any of the magazines in the industry was “The Massachusetts magazine”. [4]



A theoretical analysis of the American Magazine, specifically in relation to American periodicals, is lacking [28].

*“We would need to know the range and type of newspaper and magazine publication; we would need to know a lot about circulation and content, and about the writers, editors, and proprietors, and their attitudes towards the hoped-for readership, including for example, whether the object of each periodical was to make money or to influence people or, if both, in what proportion—and these factors would have to be seen not just at a given moment but dynamically through the runs of the serials. We would need to know something, perhaps a good deal, about the readership for the various publications, who bought what, what was distributed for free to whom, what clubs or places of entertainment made what available, and what sort of reading aloud or word-of-mouth extension of news and opinion took place, and, finally and most difficult of all to recapture, how seriously particular publications were read or listened to and how their actual influence might be measured. (Wolf 1971, 14)”*

### **2.1. The creation of mass magazine audiences**

People may ask why all of these publications had a very short lifespan. Well, the format was not immediately popular or economically viable due to low colonial-era literacy rates as well as production and distribution expenses. By the early 19th century a different, less educated audience was identified, and new types of magazines for entertainment and family enjoyment began to appear, among them the popular weekly, the women’s weekly, the religious and missionary review, the illustrated magazine, and the children’s weekly[6]. The first widely known U.S. magazine, “The Saturday Evening Post”, did not appear until 1821[5]. However, there were almost 100 general titles in existence by 1825 and some 600 by 1850,[7] establishing perhaps the first true mass medium.

### **2.2. The first great audience change**

Starting with the 1830s, cheaper magazines aimed at the general public began to appear. Rather than preserving the intellectual atmosphere of their predecessors, these magazines focused on entertainment [4]. In the mid-19th century, monthly magazines gained popularity. They were general interests to begin with, containing some news, vignettes, poems, history, political events, and social discussion [9]. Unlike newspapers, they were more of a monthly record of current events along with entertaining stories, poems, and pictures.

With the outbreak of the Civil War, the magazine industry became a strong thread in the fabric of American social life, and journals took roughly their modern form - as printed and bound brochures issued at regular intervals, containing verbal and pictorial material that could be variously descriptive, narrative or critical [8].It was in the 1880s when literacy in the world increased exponentially. As a consequence, magazines became more specialized. Periodicals started to be created for some specific professions .

This change in essence was providing entertainment for the people of the USA in the 19th century. The general population which consumed this type of divertissement was so moved by it that it seemed like the American society was changing and a new culture was born.

The increasing number of published magazines was as much an artifact of a general increase in American prosperity in the last decade of the eighteenth century as anything else, of what Mann calls

*“a tide that reflected the confidence of prosperity as farmers and planters, artisans and shopkeepers, traders and merchants borrowed against anticipated profits to finance the undertakings that they knew—not hoped, but knew—would create. Their dreams and ambitions took light on wings of entrepreneurial indebtedness, more enticingly known as investment. Not surprisingly, some faltered*

*while others soared. Crops fail, prices fall, ships sink, warehouses burn, owners die, partners steal, pirates pillage, wars ravage, and people simply make mistakes. In highly leveraged, largely uninsured economies, even single misfortunes can bring ruin [29]. ”*

### **3. The birth of modern magazines and their short life in the 20th century**

The modern national magazine was created somewhere in the closing years of the nineteenth century. Its birth can be arbitrarily dated in a variety of ways. Congress encouraged the rise of periodicals by granting inexpensive mailing privileges in 1879. S. S. McClure, John Brisben Walker, and Frank Munsey's study was published in 1893 and tapped a whole new reader audience by making magazines more affordable for the general public. In 1897, Cyrus Curtis purchased the ailing Saturday Evening Post for \$1,000 and started to revive it. In 1899, George Horace Lorimer took the helm of the Saturday Evening Post and began adjusting it to popular tastes. However, the contemporary national magazine didn't actually start in one year, but in a period stretching across more than a decade [10].

Americans had access to a wide variety of specialized interests' magazines when the last decade of the nineteenth century began. There were publications for travel and discovery like National Geographic, publications for science like Popular Science Monthly and Scientific American, publications for *Glass of Fashion, Home Arts, Ladies' World*, and even *Babyhood*, a publication on baby care, are magazines that cover fashion and homemaking.

*Harper's Weekly* and *Leslie's*, with their plethora of current pictures, are two examples of early picture and news magazines. Phrenology, vocal culture, the single-tax movement, and gardening all had their own magazines. There were publications of many different kinds, including humor, business and trade, literary, sports, and other magazines [11].

The idea of advertising also gained traction, with total ad revenue in 1914 rising from \$256 million to \$528 million by 1919 as a result of higher readership during the World War I era [12].

Nevertheless, John Tebbel and Mary Ellen Zuckerman also thought that the debut of TIME in 1923 really marked the start of the modern age for the American magazine industry [13]. Henry Luce and Briton Hadden, who founded the publication with funds borrowed from friends and acquaintances, intended to compile information on general-interest subjects and distill it into departmentalized short-form articles to organize the stream of world news. Their audience was expected to be college-educated readers and those interested in the news of the day [13].

However, the industry was heavily affected by the advent of main technological and financial developments, the radio and the outstanding Depression, respectively. With national unemployment rates arriving 25 percent in the 1930s and discretionary earnings in households much reduced, the magazine subscription appeared like a luxury, whereas owning a radio provided a wider range of entertainment features [14].

World War II halted the rise of new media throughout the 1940s, allowing the print industry a brief reprieve from growing competition for ad revenue. New radio stations were prohibited, and the construction of television channels was put on hold for four years by the Federal Communication Commission, effectively stunting their early development. Close-up coverage of the conflict was provided by periodicals as pictorial publications like *Life* and *Look* contributed to the growth of the photojournalism sector [15].

The delay was only temporary. Early in the 1950s, television became a dominant force in the American media landscape, transforming American society and causing sharp drops in magazine circulation

and advertising. Twenty years later, six of the top nine general-news publications from the 1950s had ceased publishing [16].

However, the resurgence of niche magazines in the 1960s and 1970s occurred at the same time that one door closed and another opened. Examples of the tendency include the launches of the feminism-focused publication *Ms*, the automotive enthusiast publication *Car and Driver*, and the rock music publication *Rolling Stone*. The fact that these newspapers were not directly competing for the mass market advertising revenue, which was shifting more and more toward television, gave them a very substantial edge over mainstream publications. The industry faced far greater challenges with the advent of the Internet, the subsequent revolution. After the first Internet site was made in 1991, the first magazines were made available on the World Wide Web by the middle of the 1990s, creating what seemed to be a got send of convenience while also appealing to the magazine industry as a potential means to reduce its cost base.

#### **4. A new culture that changed the society**

The journal served as a low-cost resource for everyday living instruction for millions of Americans. They received advice on how to raise kids, deal with marital and money issues, and get along with one another. It included instructions on how to furnish and decorate their homes, take care of their gardens, and make nutrient-dense food on a budget. It gave them advice on how to take care of their face and bodies, the newest trends in clothing and hairstyles, and manners-related issues. It gave instructions on how to build lamps, bookcases, chairs, tables, and even the dwellings where they should be placed.

We might reflect on the meaning of the term "middle class" as well as the more specific "new middle class" together with the dangers of treating both as unified wholes or assuming the existence of a class independent of the way it is understood and represented by its members and others in light of how popular magazines intersected with middle class thinking, feeling, and agency [17]. A social class category, like the working class or "petit-bourgeoisie," which did not provide the basis for group unity and political action, is the salient and pertinent one in this situation. It was a language or discourse that, at least until the mid-1890s, effectively engendered a unity and agency that had a significant impact. In his study of the "radical middle class," Robert Johnston distinguishes between a "professional elite" who identified with capitalists and a "lower middle class" that consisted of entry-level professionals and small business owners. Johnston charts the emergence of a radical middle-class insurgency in Portland during the first decade of the twentieth century. This divide, which has its origins in Portland's difficulties during the Progressive Era, calls into doubt the cohesiveness of the term "professional middle class." [18]

While most readers of popular magazines were from the middle class, the language of consumption, like the new liberalism, cut across class lines. Popular magazines, as a major national advertising medium, were instrumental in creating or socializing consumers as early as the 1890s. In order to avoid fierce pricing rivalry, firms, as noted by Ohmann, reached national markets with name brand products and spoke directly to their readers as customers [21]. Magazines spoke the language of advertising with their formulaic storytelling, predictable content arrangement, and approach to educating readers about new items. Middle-class men navigating the new worlds of college and the corporate job path, as well as middle-class women who were starting to shop for the home, were drawn to this language [20]. These early magazine advertisements frequently reassured readers that they did not have to give up more traditional cultural ideas founded in producer-republicanism and market liberalism in order to accept the new. In other words, advertising incorporated these outdated ideas of femininity (as a product of patriarchal households) and masculinity (the self-made or educated man) into the new liberalism of corporate capitalism [22].

Popular publications praised the "self-made man" while also making the argument that the independent male self might not be all that autonomous or all that sensible. Here was yet another example of the evolution of market liberalism. While the expression "self-made man" can be traced back at least to the 1830s, the modern interpretation popular in the 1890s virtually always focused on the entrepreneur in an industrial setting [19]. It has long been accepted that femininity is represented by beauty. "While many roles are denied to females, that of beauty object is subtly as well as overtly encouraged. To enact femininity is to become a kind of exhibitionist, to display oneself as a decorative object" (Freedman 1986:37). Women have historically risen to positions of authority and influence based more on their physical attributes than on their brains or acts, as men have. "Whereas men are more frequently judged by their social status, intellect, or material success, women are commonly defined in terms of their appearance and relationship to men" (Betterton 1987:7). Women typically put more care into their looks since they are more likely to be assessed on it. "Beauty work has historically been the province of women" (Reischer and Koo 2004:298) [30].

One strategy for occupational groupings to express their market power and encourage the transformation of institutions like universities, schools, the media, medicine, the family, and urban life was professionalization. The idea of professionalization included a push to exert market dominance for more significant social or societal goals. Although comparable pieces could be found in many major magazines, magazines led the way in promoting professionalization as a career and as a manner of reform [23].

## 5. Messy Modernism

Magazines were becoming more and more important resources for gaining a fresh perspective on the dynamic interaction between "fine" art and popular culture. Numerous American publications hired artists to create pieces for covers and feature stories during the 20th century, but many of these commissions have been overlooked in histories of modernism.

### 5.1. Edward Hopper and the "Wells Fargo Way"

Edward Hopper created thirteen covers for the Wells Fargo Messenger, an internal publication that included news stories, essays, and reflections on the company's past, between 1916 and 1919. During these years, Hopper really contributed to a number of business and trade magazines, but he forged a special bond with the Wells Fargo organ, afterwards known as The Express Messenger, for which he also created advertisements and pull-out sections. The business created the much-heralded "Wells Fargo Way," which placed an emphasis on productivity, dependability, timeliness, and honesty as the country headed toward World War One. Hopper's pictures contributed to this cause with their readable, pictorial style and recurrent imagery of clocks, money, delivery men, and mercantile exchange. His Wells Fargo illustrations capture not only the subject matter of banks, offices, hotels, and retail businesses but also the sensation of queuing, haggling, working, and making purchases at these locations, unlike past covers for the periodical and unlike most prior commercial illustration. Some of these pictures use Postimpressionist artistic techniques to depict distinctly American scenes, but they are most audacious in tackling topics that have received little attention in business literature, such as African American workers and women who are traveling alone. Hopper's illustrations for Wells Fargo helped bring a nineteenth-century company into the modern era by capturing the mundane but crucial in-between moments of people navigating commercial situations. What was previously a Pony Express business was now in line with the speed, security, and level of service provided in America during World War I.



## 5.2. "Objectivity" in Wartime U.S.A.: Mine Okubo and *Fortune* Magazine

Seventeen of Mine Okubo's drawings depicting her experiences in a Japanese American internment camp during World War II were published in *Fortune* magazine in April 1944. They serve as an illustration for a piece on the camps, which had living circumstances akin to modern migrant holding facilities. Two years later, the illustrations and words appeared in *Citizen 13660*, her graphic memoir. However, in *Fortune*, xenophobic articles, graphs, images, drawings, captions, maps, and adverts focusing on Japan and its people are in direct conversation with them. Okubo's illustrations are praised for their "objectivity" by *Fortune*. In actuality, they were covertly subversive, getting over government censorship and revealing the abuses she had to deal with. Okubo realized that in order to have any kind of voice at all, she had to create scenarios that appeared to be "objective." Otherwise, in light of the purported "hard facts" used throughout the rest of the issue to condemn Japan and its people, her drawings would be rejected as purely subjective artworks. Many claim that the symbiotic link between the corporate and artistic worlds ended in the mid-1940s, when narrative art and commercial commissions were the talk of the art world. However, the publication of Okubo's drawings in *Fortune* shows how magazines still play a significant role in the arts as a medium for reaching attentive audiences and possibly inspiring change. The background to which artists were unavoidably responding was shown by widely read magazines. By doing this, these publications muddle and broaden understandings of 20th-century American modernism.

## 5.3. Beyond *The New Yorker*: Saul Steinberg's Other Magazine Commissions

While Saul Steinberg's illustrations for *The New Yorker* were well-known, many of his commissions for publications in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, such as *Life*, *Look*, *Time*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, *Fortune*, *Flair*, and *Mademoiselle*, had received little or no attention. These projects, which were commissioned to go with stories on a variety of topics, from baseball and horseracing to radio, opera, and business, gave Steinberg the chance to experiment with color, collage, and photography without being constrained by *The New Yorker's* three-column, black-and-white format. The magazine page served as an experimental platform for Steinberg, where he could play with hybrid forms, mixed media, collage, and new reproduction methods. Additionally, it looked at the networks that supported these corporate commissions and Steinberg's partnerships with editors, designers, writers, and photographers at a variety of magazines. These magazine commissions not only contradicted common perceptions of American art patronage and production, but they also defied straightforward classification. These pieces, like a lot of Steinberg's work, provided a potent illustration of the complexity of modernism. In fact, the art world didn't quite know where to position them since, as Steinberg put it, "I don't exactly belong to the art, cartoon, or magazine world."

## 6. How has American magazine culture influenced the rest of the world decades after?

American society was changed by the culture brought up through the media that the majority of the population (middle class) was consuming. It's no doubt that the USA is in the majority of time a trendsetter, and so was in the 20th century.

The 20th century provided changes not only for America, but for the entire globe. We had political conflicts that led to two world wars, and then to the change of national borders between countries and new forms of governments.

The way that Europe views America has undergone a significant adjustment since 1957. The rapid rise in self-awareness and self-confidence on the Continent has bred a hostility to and frequently a contempt for the United States that has gone beyond all reason, despite the peculiarly carping kind of anti-Americanism

that has come to dominate attitudes toward the United States in Britain. Speaking at the meeting of the Assembly of the Council of Europe, in April 1961, Signor Bettiol of Italy, for example, said [27]:

*“We in Europe have not only lost confidence in American policy, but above all in American leadership of world policy. Hence the vital need for a European states now that America can regrettably no longer face up to the historic responsibility no longer face up to the historic responsibility she had assumed, but all too often leaves us to meet the storm by ourselves. ...Europe can solve its own problems...”*

Although this cultural discrepancy between America and Europe existed there was an untold inspiration of the American example so the reader was aware—however dimly—that other people read the same publications he did, and that doing so connected them on a cultural level.

If the trend was somewhat over for the Americans when the technologic rise hit, in Europe, for example it was still an intact activity, a couple of decades after. After the Cold War ended and the people of the Eastern Europe and West Asia were now freed of the censorship, reading magazines was fashionable for them more than half a decade after the golden age of magazines back in America.

## 7. The future of American Magazines in the next century

In recent years, especially as a result of the digitization of messages, the role of the media in society has changed. In the past, audiences were forced to rely largely on messages that were produced, disseminated, and regulated by institutions like companies and major media outlets. These organizations decided which topics and stories were noteworthy, affecting how the general public saw what was significant [25].

The magazine industry is not dead. Nowadays we can't talk about the American magazine industry because in the present everything is globalized. Sales of magazines remained above 220 million in every year between 2016 and 2020, having previously hovered around the 210 and 215 million mark as the study of 'U.S magazine industry – statistics and facts' of Statistica.com says. [2]

With just a click of the mouse, more than 25,000 American online magazines are now accessible. Launched in 1995, Salon.com presently has 7.6 million unique Internet users per month [24]. However, Internet and digital advertising do not even come close to making up for the money made by print editions - in 2011, digital ad revenue represented a pitiful 0.04 percent of all magazine ad revenue, according to the accounting and consulting firm PriceWaterhouseCoopers [25] - creating a pressing problem for publications looking to use the internet as a distribution channel.

Magazines have a future, but it's different from their past. Probably in the next century the printed version of magazines will completely disappear, but the online format will be accessible. The articles that these publications contain are still very important to the quotidian life of the working collective, either for information about the society that they are functioning in or just for entertainment.

## 8. Conclusion

In this age of humankind familiarity with the world is essential, even just for amusement. Media is a part of people's lives. Like most other media, magazines seek to inform, persuade and entertain their audiences and put before them advertising messages of national, regional, state and city scope.

One of magazines' most comforting qualities in the 20th century was the variety of their entertainment, knowledge, and ideas. Their diversity resulted from their audience selection. Certain periodicals did achieve circulations in the millions by attracting readers with extremely diverse tastes and

interests. Because the editors targeted niche audiences within the general populace, magazines as a whole reflected a diverse range of preferences and viewpoints.

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