

Magazines Canada commentary

Public Engagement and Canada's cultural magazines in the 21st Century

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Canada's cultural magazines continue to demonstrate tremendous capacity to satisfy Canadian demand for quality home-grown content when measured by any definition of public engagement, market access and creative excellence.

“Cultural magazines deserve the place they have found... They contribute to a better Canada.”

Dr. Rowland Lorimer, from his cultural magazines [benchmarks study of 2011](#) commissioned by Magazines Canada

Today, Canadian magazine publishers are—and see themselves as—**branded Canadian content creators on multiple platforms**. The approach today is to develop great content and then to determine how best to reach a specific audience segment, whether in print, online, mobile, at live events and so on. In this context, our cultural magazines are held back only by the resource challenges of our times, not by any lack of innovative thinking or inclination to engage differently with their respective communities of interest on any number of platforms. First and foremost, our magazines have always published—“made public”—content that has been carefully tailored for a specific audience and encouraged a response from the specific audiences: for example, showcasing readers' views in the letters pages. This approach to public engagement is the “publisher DNA” that, even with limited resources, is the basis upon which Canada's magazines are embracing the future.

The magazine publisher DNA is proving to be well suited to the new and evolving era of magazine content delivery: wherever, whenever and however Canadians want it. **The history of magazines is one based on demand first**. A magazine on any platform is fully interactive with its audience. A magazine without an audience simply does not “perform.” A magazine without an audience does not exist. Obviously, then, all magazine support grant programs must and do have eligibility requirements ensuring that a magazine audience exists first and before any funding can be secured. **Most funding programs are tied to demand on a continuing basis**. A magazine demonstrates *with each issue* that it has achieved market access and has engaged current and new public audiences. This paper will provide some evidence and insight into this success. But, we must begin by dispelling some myths and putting the facts in context.

Print magazines are alive and well. Canadian-owned Canadian content magazines are reaching [more audiences](#) today than even five years ago. Readers-per-copy measurements have remained steady for the past six years ([Magazine 2012 Trends](#), pg. 11). Consumption of print magazines by 18-34 year-old Canadian is the highest of all the demographics ([Magazine 2012 Trends](#), pg. 13). The perception that print is in decline in general is in fact as a result of the performance of *other print platforms*, not magazines.

Poor and/or little research negatively impacts on the perception of the value of all cultural activity. Misconceptions about cultural activity in general and cultural print magazines in particular have been exacerbated by the weak data that is available—data that is often badly analyzed. This is an issue Magazines Canada has raised with respect to arts council-funded “studies,” most notably in one based on the Statistics Canada household survey. Overall, we agree with the Council's paper where it suggests that measurement by and large is poor. This lack of proper measurement needs to be rectified if there is to be a commitment to effective public policy for arts and cultural activity.

However, there are good examples of magazine research. One example of quality research is the Magazines Canada-commissioned [benchmarks studies](#) of Canada Council client data analyzed independently by Dr. Rowland Lorimer of SFU. The competently executed 2011 survey, with a sampling of 94 magazines, demonstrated that “*Canadian cultural magazines are a substantial and growing national enterprise*” generating almost \$15 million, circulating over a half million print copies (over and above this is the impact of digital content uptake) and operating with effectiveness that is not deficit prone. Further, Canada’s magazine media as a whole invest substantially in [consumer research and analysis](#) to satisfy the expectations of leading advertisers for credible performance indicators. A great deal of this information is shared widely and is utilized by cultural magazines. In the end all forms of cultural and/or commercial activity have one thing in common: the same Canadian audience. There is, therefore, a basis upon which we can build better knowledge of all cultural magazines and their impact.

Audiences will pay for digital content. In general, we accept that the online world is a complex one with no end of free, pirated and junk content. Canada’s magazine media has approached the development of the digital space with the same discipline it demonstrates when it approaches its print audiences. First, create excellent content and, second, find audiences who will pay for it. The climb to monetization in the digital space is slow and steep but the early results are encouraging. For example, [Magazine Canada’s digital store](#) has sold well over a million copies since its launch in 2009. That is *over a million sales, not downloads*—a distinction that must be stressed.

Digital is not replacing print. Because Canada’s magazine media offers focused niche titles, there is strong “brand” recognition that is [attracting new audiences](#) in the digital space, and *not cannibalizing the brand’s existing print audience*. Some cultural magazines have chosen to focus more intensely on one platform or another, but most see the opportunity to diversify audience reach by being accessible on multiple platforms. Further, because magazine readers are heavy internet users, the online-to-print-to-online experience is enriching the value of the content for all audiences.

The MPA survey, “[Magazine Media Readers and Smartphones](#),” found that mobile and print magazine readership *supplement rather than replace* one another:

- 61% [of respondents] see their overall readership of printed magazines increasing or remaining the same since they began reading digital magazines on their smartphone
- Respondents would be willing to pay a fixed amount for total access to a magazine’s content across any device or platform, including print copies (57% agree)
- Half of respondents subscribe or buy single issues via a newsstand like iTunes or Amazon while 31% have a digital subscription through their print subscription
- More than three quarters feel it’s important to have the option to share magazine content they are reading with friends; those who download the most and spend the most time reading digital magazine content feel the strongest about this.

Why Canada's cultural magazines are achieving success.

Magazines Canada defines “public engagement” as the means by which publishers engage with current and potential communities on any number of platforms— whether they are online forums , social media, portals, collaborative initiatives such as festivals, trade shows and so on This is the interaction component. Further, we define” market access” as activity that draws readers to specific magazine content offerings which provides the opportunity to purchase Canadian content on multiple platforms. This is the transaction component. In this context, our magazines are very, very successful:

1) Cultural Magazines create excellence in original Canadian content

Canada's cultural magazines constantly create and premier original cultural works, from fiction to visual arts to discussion of public affairs. They also report on and provide critical review of arts, cultural and social activity that is both thorough and thoughtful. Whether semi-annually, quarterly or monthly, they offer new content created specifically for each and every issue. There are no repeat performances.

And how do we measure excellence in our cultural magazines? Simply stated, by looking at the company they keep. Core audiences for magazines are discerning, knowledgeable and [fully engaged](#) with their favourite titles. And, they renew their commitment year after year. Equally telling is that the volunteer commitment to cultural magazines is strong, again reflecting the value of the content created. These measurements are derived from a confluence of both qualitative and quantitative evidence. Additionally, our cultural magazines enjoy critical praise from peers through arts council assessments and via a myriad of industry-based [awards programs across Canada](#).

2) Cultural magazines embrace and reflect Canada's diversity

Ideally, all arts and cultural activity should aspire to engage and reflect the complexities of an evolving Canadian society: locally, regionally, nationally across a vast geography, in both official and founding nations' languages and embracing the evolving enrichment of ethno-cultural diversity. As evidenced in the range of communities of interest they serve, Canada's cultural magazines not only aspire to this ideal, they fully succeed. **This takes the excellence of the content and adds the next step: relevance.** This relevance can be seen in the list of [Canada Council magazines](#) as well as the participants in [Magazines Canada's magazine store](#), both in digital and print. And how do cultural magazines demonstrate this relevance? By securing measurable audiences acquired through various access-to-market initiatives.

3) Cultural magazines' access-to-market initiatives have strong measurable results

The 2011 benchmark study (of Canada Council clients only) compares aggregated circulation activity results to 2010:

*“Nearly 520,000 paid-for copies of various issues circulated throughout the year, 407,000 in English and 112,000 in French. These copies were read, in all probability, by at least two million readers. This estimate is based on firm data provided by Magazines Canada, but **for a limited selection of titles in which readers per copy ranged from 1.8 to 6.3.** The titles published across the country and supported by the Council served over 81,000 subscribers, 65,000 in English and 16,000 in French (overall up by 4,600 from the previous year). As well, 50,000 nonsubscription sales were made; 37,000 English-language magazines and 13,000 French-language titles. Subscribing purchasers predominated in numbers over annualized nonsubscription purchasers; more so for English- language titles (64% of total) than French-language titles (55% of total).” (A Guide to the Canada Council Benchmarks for Canadian Magazines (2010 data), pg. 1)*

How is this being accomplished?

Canada's cultural magazines deploy every available option to reach and sustain an audience. They approach these initiatives as individual titles, but they also have great success in collaborative efforts. They use association collective services for sales and fulfilment (as well as privately contract cooperatives). They co-promote in small collectives. They participate in events where sales can be made. They hold contests, take reader submissions and the list goes on. We have gathered a sampling of the initiatives to which you can link here:

- [The NUB: Indie Arts Hub cooperative application](#)
- [The Malahat Review/The Fiddlehead Fall 2012 joint issues](#)
- [Musicworks music contests](#)
- [The Vallum Award for Poetry 2013](#)
- [esse arts + opinions fundraiser art auctions](#)

4) Cultural magazines actively broaden public engagement in innovative ways

Each of Canada's cultural magazines sees in its respective community of interest a mandate to broaden awareness and participation that transcends the reading of the magazine itself. This is the advocacy mandate and it can be seen in all categories. It is bringing poets to public readings. It is holding a forum on social policy. It is advancing First Nations music and culture. It is the magazine brand that can be used to promote events that highlight new ideas, emerging artists, rural life, heritage activity, international dance and so on. We have gathered a sampling of public engagement activity to which you can link here:

- [Geist Spring Workshop Series](#)
- [Coupe international Design + Image Competition](#) (first point)
- [Filling Station Hot Dates With Blank Pages event](#) and [Flywheel reading series](#).
- [Canadian Art talks](#) and [school](#)
- [The Vie des Arts Foundation](#)

Conclusion

A commitment to excellence, hard work and a focus on audience is why Canada's cultural magazines truly do "*contribute to a better Canada.*" And while cultural magazine publishers are always eager to learn, they have much to teach the arts and cultural sector about focus, market access and successful public engagement.

About Magazines Canada

Magazines Canada is the national trade association representing Canadian-owned, Canadian-content consumer, cultural, specialty, professional and business media magazines. French and English member titles offer a wide range of topics including business, professional, news, politics, sports, arts and culture, leisure, lifestyle, women and youth, made available on multiple platforms. The association focuses on government affairs, services to the advertising trade, circulation marketing and the development of career skills for and the recognition of excellence among the people who work in Canada's magazine media.