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Report on the First Annual Cultural Magazines Summit, October 16, 2015

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Written on behalf of Magazines Canada



Introduction

The Cultural Magazines Summit was held in downtown Toronto on October 16, 2015. It was attended by 59 people representing 29 different magazines from across Canada. It was also attended by Magazines Canada staff and representatives from the Ontario Arts Council, the Canada Council for the Arts and the Department of Canadian Heritage.

Arts and culture publications generally have smaller circulations and different priorities and approaches than the mainstream magazines that are well served by the ongoing annual MagNet program as well as other events and conferences available throughout the year. As a result, the Summit was organized in response to the identified need for more opportunities for skills upgrades, professional development and peer information exchange specifically for arts and culture magazines. The Cultural Magazines Summit was held directly after the FIPP World Congress, an international magazines conference held in Toronto this year. This gave participants the opportunity to attend both a large-scale magazine conference and a summit focused directly on their needs and concerns.

The Summit was initiated by Magazines Canada with programming finalized by Magazines Canada staff after suggestions and input from a volunteer committee of arts and cultural magazine professionals who met several times in advance of the Summit.

The Summit was a day-long event including lunch and a reception directly after. The sessions were moderated by either Melanie Rutledge or Hal Niedzviecki.

Attendees

The following magazines had attendees at the Summit: *Alberta Views*, *Azure*, *Brick*, *Broken Pencil*, *C Magazine*, *Canadian Art*, *Canadian Geographic*, *Concrete Wave*, *Eighteen Bridges*, *Event*, *Geist*, *Literary Review of Canada*, *Little Brother*, *Maisonneuve*, *Musicworks*, *Newfoundland Quarterly*, *Room Magazine*, *SubTerrain*, *The Dance Current*, *The Fiddlehead*, *The New Quarterly*, *The Pacific Rim Review of Books*, *The Walrus*, *This Magazine*, *Vallum: Contemporary Poetry*, *Windspeaker*.

Goals

The purpose of the Cultural Magazines Summit was to bring together as many Canadian cultural magazines as possible in order to achieve the following goals:

- Deliver a high-quality conference designed specifically for cultural magazines with a focus on professional development and skills upgrades.
- Create opportunities for cultural magazines across Canada to share knowledge, establish ongoing communication networks, and foster potential partnerships.
- Foster overall awareness within the cultural magazines industry itself, as well as its partners, of the current standards and benchmarks of arts and culture magazine publishing in Canada and establish concrete, actionable goals for improving the publishing practices and overall reach of arts and cultural magazines in Canada.
- Assess the need for an annual conference focusing on arts and culture publishing in Canada.

Conference Sessions

Session 1: Brand Extensions and You

Speakers: Hannah Trumper, AZ Awards Coordinator, *Azure Magazine*; David Leonard, Director of Events and Special Projects, *The Walrus*

Goal: To present case studies of cultural magazines that have successfully leveraged their brand to create a separate income-enhancing product/experience. This product/experience must be both sustainable (i.e., covers its costs or is a money-maker) and lead to increased opportunities for the core business of magazine publishing (i.e., leads to increased subscriptions, advertising sales or other opportunities).

Session Content: Two case studies were presented: *Azure Magazine's* AZ Design Awards and the Walrus Talks speaking series. Both speakers outlined in detail the function of their brand extension, including: how and why it was founded; a general overview of its purpose and operation; successes and challenges; current state of the brand extension as a source of revenue and as a value-added component to overall publishing practice.

Attendees received a comprehensive overview of these two different types of brand extensions. There was also considerable discussion of generally how to identify opportunities for brand extension within an organization; what hurdles and difficulties are to be expected; best practices for overcoming hurdles and succeeding in launching a brand extension.

Response and Takeaway: Most magazines in attendance were not executing a brand extension of their own, and there was considerable interest in this kind of activity. Attendees asked questions about the organization and acquisition of sponsors and the relationship between the brand extension and the core brand. There was also a lot of concern about the work load involved in starting and running a brand extension and how to evaluate the feasibility in the context of small organizations with staff already struggling under workload.

In the post-presentation takeaway session at the end of the Summit, there was discussion that one of the key takeaways of the day had to do with content—repurposing and reimagining content in creative ways, including talks and other brand extensions. There was the sense that a tremendous amount of work was already being done to produce content, and that most magazines could get more out of their content through brand extension. There was also the realization/sense that most magazines at the Summit needed better protocols in terms of engaging and working long term with sponsors if these kinds of brand extensions were going to be successful.

Session 2: Creative Collaborations

Speakers: Jonny Dovercourt, Artistic Director, Wavelength; Kathleen Mclean, Adult Program Coordinator, Public Programming & Learning the Art Gallery of Ontario; Jay Millar, Publisher, Book Thug publishing

Goal: To present case studies of two brands/organizations working together to advance overall brand awareness and audience engagement within their organizations. The goal here is not necessarily to generate additional revenue through the collaboration (though ideally such events would at the very least be ultimately revenue neutral) but to establish ongoing relationships with other organizations that increase brand recognition, introduce new audiences to core product and otherwise grow the organization.

Session Content: Three cases studies were presented. Jonny Dovercourt, director of the Wavelength music presentation organization, discussed the Camp Wavelength music festival which was put on in collaboration with Artscape Gibraltar Point. Kathleen McLean, director of Adult Engagement at the Art Gallery of Ontario, discussed a collaboration with the Canadian Journalists for Free Expression and the AGO's presentation of a major exhibit of the works of Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. Jay Millar, publisher of publishing house BookThug, discussed the small press' collaboration with the Canzine Festival of Zines and Underground Culture.

All three presenters discussed in a fair degree of detail how and why they collaborated with a different organization. They made it clear that while collaboration can be a significant amount of work, it's generally successful if both organizations have similar, overlapping expectations and goals for the event, and if there is ongoing communication between the organizations to determine all the details of the event regarding who is doing what when. In each case, the presenters noted that they partnered with an organization that had a distinct audience from their own. At the same time, there was enough overlap in interest that the potential was there to attract new audiences to the partnership.

After discussing how to identify a potential partnership and how to approach a potential sponsor, the presenters went on to describe in detail the function of their particular partnership. This included discussion of: how the partnership was initially arranged and framed; what the ultimate parameters of the partnership were for each organization; what emerged during the execution of the partnership event; and what the partnership ultimately delivered or failed to deliver.

Response and Takeaway: While most of the attendees had worked in a collaborative effort of some kind, most of them had not formalized these arrangements or considered formalizing them into annual collaborations or otherwise thought about them in the context of collaboration. Questions post presentation covered how to approach a potential collaboration partner, how to consider staffing and administration when an organization is lacking in additional staff hours to support collaboration, and how to set goals for a collaborative event. There was considerable discussion regarding how best to approach an organization for collaboration, particularly if the organization is significantly larger. It was re-emphasized during this portion of the discussion that it was necessary to be very clear what your organization could supply in the proposed partnership—access to a younger audience, for example—which many established organizations don't have as readily as an arts and culture magazine.

In the post-presentation takeaway session, one theme that emerged that was clearly influenced by this presentation was the need for annual, long-term goal setting around the question of community engagement. There was general recognition that publications needed

to do more direct community engagement and less indirect online engagement, and that this planning could be achieved through collaboration.

Session 3: Going Digital: Money Pit or Good Business?

Speakers: Sarah Efron, *Editor, The Globe and Mail Report on Small Business*; Sky Gooden, *publisher and editor, Momus*

Goal: To assist publishers in establishing achievable goals in the digital space; to give publishers a better overview of how to best approach analytics; to discuss areas of potential income in the digital space and assist publishers in avoiding areas that consume resources without providing much in the way of rewards. As publishers are now all running websites and social media operations and more than half have digital editions, this discussion was designed to explore with more complexity how to get the most out of digital operations.

Session Content: The two speakers explored different aspects of how they publish digitally and how to approach making choices about services and resources. There was discussion about figuring out what niche your publication occupies, and how to extend that success into the digital publishing world. Both speakers explored the question: how is your content driving your digital strategy? How can publishers strategize their business model to fit content goals in a digital context?

There was also discussion about setting overall goals and determining how those goals can be met through digital publishing, rather than letting the digital process itself determine goals. This includes financial goals as well as thematic and editorial goals. Among other issues touched on were: approaches to developing quality content for digital; the ongoing dominance of Facebook; digital editions; video; newsletters; approaches to analytics and what to measure; factoring in staff time in any discussion of return on investment; integrating sponsorship into emerging digital approaches.

Takeaway and Response: The takeaway was quite nuanced—different publications with different needs responded to various aspects of what was presented. As few of the attendee magazines generate much or any direct profit from their websites and social media, there was considerable interest in the *Momus* approach of moving away from banner ads and toward native embedded advertising and informal partnerships with art galleries. This was discussed at length and many magazines found it intriguing though potentially full of pitfalls. There was also considerable interest in Sarah Efron's discussion of driving traffic to sites via social media, particularly Facebook. What and when to share was part of an overall conversation focusing on the extent to which resources should be devoted to social media and how best to manage those resources for maximum effect.

In the post-presentation takeaway session, there was considerable discussion, clearly influenced by this session, on allowing content to drive digital strategy, including not being afraid to post and share longer works online; partnering with sponsors and advertisers and agreeing to share and post their content (identified as such) in order to fund digital initiatives; and connecting digital outreach to community outreach—writing back directly and specifically to those who communicate with the magazine via social, and approaching people directly to subscribe as opposed to issuing email blasts that are all too easy to ignore.

Session 4: Canada Council Benchmarks Overview

Speaker: Rowland Lorimer, Publishing Program Director, Simon Fraser University

Goal: Working with the data collected in 2013 about arts and culture magazines funded by the Canada Council, the goal was to present statistical conclusions to assist the arts and culture magazine industry to establish benchmarks and better understand the overall picture of their operations.

Session Content: This was a detailed overview of the Canada Council Benchmarks Study, with data collected from Canada Council-funded magazines in 2013. It included detailed discussion of revenue, expenditures, circulation and readership and other magazine trends. Highlights from the overview: reader-based revenue in the arts and literary category is similar to that of commercial titles; income performance measures are up slightly, including paid circulation, ad sales donations and fundraising; grants have decreased as a percentage of overall revenue; 85% of the electronic edition budget is donations and none of the electronic editions are paying their staff regularly. Overall, there was a sense that the arts and culture sector has entered a period of modest growth, rebounding from the collapse of small retail outlets and the general economic downturn by both continuing to put out quality product and using new tools to better market that product.

Takeaway and Response: There was quite a bit of discussion and request for clarification throughout the presentation. The general consensus in the room was that the numbers did accurately reflect the current state of the arts and culture magazine sector. There was discussion regarding how these benchmarks might be used both internally and externally by partners such as granting agencies. While there was some concern over granting bodies using benchmarks to make funding decisions, the general reaction was that the benchmarks would assist publishers to evaluate their magazines within the context of peer performance.

In the post-presentation takeaway session, it was clear that this session was on the minds of publishers who repeatedly stressed the need for strategic planning, including the setting of internal benchmarks. Also discussed was the need for granting bodies to expand their

assessment of a magazine's reach beyond just circulation. There was the feeling that granting bodies should be encouraged to look at total reach, including website and social media and events, since magazines are investing heavily in their digital presence and reaching large numbers of people through digital mediums that were not collected as benchmarks by the Canada Council.

Session 5: Keynote Speaker

Speaker: John Freeman, former editor of *Granta*, current editor of *Freeman's*

Goal: To present an inspiring speaker with a proven contemporary understanding of arts and culture publishing; to have that speaker challenge publishing preconceptions and encourage new ways of thinking about arts and culture magazine publishing.

Session Content: John Freeman, a New York-based publisher, spoke about his role as the editor of *Granta* and his just-released publishing venture *Freeman's*, a literary magazine annual. He contrasted the insular world of *Granta* when he took over as editor, with what he was trying to achieve with *Freeman's*. He demonstrated how he used social media, word of mouth and community to reform *Granta* and to launch a world tour for *Freeman's*. One case study explored how *Granta* put together a very successful issue on the literary culture of Chicago. Another case study discussed the organization of a North American and European tour for the launch of the first issue of *Freeman's*.

Takeaway and Response: There were more questions for John Freeman than could be accommodated during the session. Attendees were very engaged by his presentation and peppered him with questions about different aspects of his approach to publishing, particularly his use of existing community and social networks to advance the goals of a publication. In the post-presentation takeaway session, there were repeated references to John Freeman's personalized approach, making it clear that this was a popular, memorable session that tapped into the core of both why and how arts and culture publishers do what they do.

Session 6: Cultivating Diversity

Speakers: Helen Walsh, director of Diaspora Dialogues and publisher of the *Literary Review of Canada*; Jen Sookfong Lee, author, CBC broadcaster and former magazine editor; Farzana Doctor, author and diversity consultant

Goal: To explore the issue of diversifying arts and culture magazines to better reflect the overall diversity of the country and cities in which they work and seek readers. The intention is to make clear, focused, concrete recommendations for how magazines can increase diversity both in terms of their writers, employees, content and, ultimately, overall readership.

Session Content: Session speakers explored the current state of diversity in arts and culture magazines, why diversity is important in these publications, and how to better approach and achieve a diversity of contributors and topics. It was noted that publications have started to emphasize the importance of diversity in content and organization, but that there is still considerable work to be done around making diversity an organizational priority.

Specific issues that were addressed included: how and why to set targets for diversity including developing three-year plans as well as shorter-term targets and goals; having discussions within the organization regarding how the organization defines diversity; examining editorial mandate as a driver for discussion around diversity; allowing writers to speak to their world rather than trying to force them into a specific viewpoint framed by the concept of “diversity”; creating a formal reporting mechanism within the organization to report on diversity goals.

Takeaway and Response: Response to this session was very animated, with quite a lot of questions and shared anecdotes. Overall, it was clear that publishers are sensitive to diversity issues, and also recognize that they can and should be doing more. They were very interested in the notion of incorporating diversity goals and benchmarks into their strategic plans. There was also a lot of discussion regarding what exactly constitutes a good model for diversity, in terms of both the subject and writer of an article. Recruitment was also an important part of the discussion, in terms of how to tap into emerging talent and find potential contributors who better reflect the diversity of arts and culture in Canada.

Diversity was reflected in the discussions at the post-presentation takeaway session: how best to incorporate diversity into planning? How best to reach out to diverse communities to recruit both new writers and readers?

Session 7: Strategic Planning

Speaker: Jennifer Green, Toronto Arts Foundation

Goal: To provide an overview of best practices on generating three- to five-year strategic plans for arts and culture magazine publishers.

Session Content: Jennifer Green provided an extremely detailed overview of both why magazines should create a strategic plan, and how to go about it. This include samples, case studies, how to get started, how to use the SWOT approach (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats), how to determine priorities and more. Her session began by articulating the reasons to make a strategic plan. These primarily revolved around building an organizational culture with clearly articulated goals shared by everyone at that organization. Jennifer then defined the attributes of a successful 3-5-year strategic plan. The rest of the session focussed on answering the question, “How does one start a strategic plan?” Jennifer broke the session into different approaches to generating different aspects of the strategic plan. These included kickoff exercises to engage the group in articulating the mandate and successes of the organization, culminating in an overall mission statement. Following that she discussed the SWOT approach in which those working on the strategic plan “identify the top three strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing [the organization] over the next three to five years.” Finally, Jennifer discussed “gap analysis” exercises in which the strategic plan identified gaps between the state of the organization at the time of making the plan and what it wanted to be. What are the gaps? How can those gaps be overcome? Once gaps have been identified, priorities for overcoming the gaps can be established as part of the actionable areas of the strategic plan.

Takeaway and Response: This session was listened to with extreme attention. There was less discussion and more note-taking and requests for clarification. Generally, it was clear that the magazines in attendance were very interested in creating strategic plans or enhancing the planning process they had already put in place.

In the post-presentation takeaway session, there was a lot of discussion about how to make, use and refine strategic planning. Of particular concern was entrenching strategic planning in the organization, so that a strategic plan could guide operations on an ongoing basis and be constantly referred to, refined and re-thought. There was an overall takeaway that strategic planning needed to be integrated and embedded in the organization for it to be most successful, and discussion of how to accomplish this was a big part of the post-session takeaway.

Session 8: Post-Presentation Takeaway Session

Led by Hal Niedzviecki

Goal: To assess the overall reactions of the attendees to the presentations; to create general, actionable items magazines felt were priorities in their organizations; to discuss a

roadmap for moving forward as an industry sector; to assess the overall worth of an annual arts and culture magazine publishing summit.

Session Content/Takeaway Response: One half of the room provided one-minute takeaways from the Summit regarding what had emerged as the most important issues for their publications; the other half of the room provided one-minute responses in terms of solutions to these issues and obstacles. The following is a summary of the ensuing discussion:

What were our key takeaways and goals from the sessions?

Strategic Planning

- Regular check-ins re: progress.
- Importance of having a strategic plan. Revision, revitalizing. (Seconded and thirded)
- Incorporate ongoing refinement of the strategic plan.

Stakeholder & Community Engagement

- Importance of stakeholder meetings. Donors, for example.
- Importance of building community and engagement.
- John Freeman's Facebook campaign—4,000 people. Reach out.

Diversity

- Walking the walk re: diversity. Needs to be part of associations, funders, etc.
- Diversity:
 - o Contributors
 - o Gaps institutionally
 - o Who is speaking for whom within the organization?

Other Takeaways

- Funders ought to assess ALL activity a magazine undertakes, beyond publishing.
- Connecting beyond silo communities—music and cultural magazines, for example.
- Importance of scrutinizing and renewing content.
- Conflicting ideas re: print & mobile.
- No separation of church and state—editorial and business reinforce each other.
- Digital—long-form content on Facebook and in newsletter.
- Include your own time on ROI when forecasting. Is it worth it?
- Experimenting with social.
- Events:

- Broadening audience
- Speakers
- Potential
- It's all about content—cultural mags provide the content, discover contributors, etc.
- Care and professionalism on the business side as well as the editorial side.

How do we accomplish the goals we have identified?

Community, stakeholders and collaboration

- Trust your community/stakeholders
- Community engagement
 - Stakeholder networks
 - Can be a useful resource
 - Form an events committee
 - Outreach to broaden audience
 - Regional cooperation—East-West
- Community-building—partnering with groups and organizations you haven't thought of before. Cast your net wide for collaborations.

Creative use of existing resources

- Be creative. Low cost ideas. “Go sideways”
- Reallocate internal resources—think about it differently.

Continue the conversation

- Let's continue this conversation—conference calls?
- Success of Cultural Magazines Summit. Let's start planning for next year.
- More opportunities for in-person communication for regional publishers.

Diversity

- Let's work on diversity, but it's challenging because it's not reflected in our readership, board, community. How do we work on this?

More resources

- More time & resources
- More human capital—full-time employees? Part-time employees?
 - Programming/development

Feedback on the Cultural Magazines Summit

Although there was no formal survey of attendees done during the Summit, informal surveys both at the reception directly following and in the days after the event revealed that everyone who attended found a very high value to the Cultural Magazines Summit. The overall response to Magazines Canada was that this was a highly valuable conference; some participants went out of their way to praise the Summit as the most useful and focused event they'd ever attended on the subject of arts and culture magazine publishing in Canada.

In particular, attendees were responsive to the way the Summit was designed to further skill development and suggest actionable, concrete steps magazines could take to improve their publishing practice. There was also agreement that the Summit was able to create panels that addressed both business and creative aspects of arts and culture publications, making it useful and inclusive to both the publishing and editorial side of magazines. Feedback also noted that arts and culture magazines from across the country rarely get a chance to gather as an industry and peer group and exchange best practices. There was consensus that this was a very important secondary value to the conference.

Overall, feedback on the first Cultural Magazines Summit has been unanimously excellent. There were, of course, also noted comments on potential improvements. These included: a request that someone from the arts and culture magazine industry always be included on panels; a request to implement a formal feedback mechanism for the Summit such as a post-event survey; and a request for the Summit to create further mechanisms for peer sharing throughout the year. There was general consensus overall that the Summit should be repeated annually.

Conclusion

The arts and culture magazine sector is healthy, growing, adding to its collective knowledge pool and refining best practices for arts and culture magazine publishing in the digital age. The Summit reflected the sense of optimism and possibility that the Canada Council Benchmarks Study revealed—modest growth, evidence-based backup for the sense that arts and culture magazines are highly valued by their audience, and a further realization that arts and culture titles are successfully competing with larger titles for readership within the general marketplace.

The Summit in many ways marks a new era for arts and culture magazines. They are emerging from many difficult cycles over the last 15 years, including the rise of digital culture, the demise of independent bookstores and a newsstand sales base, and a lengthy recession.

Those magazines that survived those turbulent years are, generally speaking, the ones that were able to weather change by diversifying their business model, successfully upgrading their infrastructure to reflect the rise of digital interconnectivity, and continuing to attract readers to an excellent content package.

As such, the feeling at the Summit was one of cautious optimism. Storms had been weathered, and the coming five to ten years could be a time of growth, renewal and possibility. The Summit, focusing as it did on opportunities to grow brand, reach new readers and plan ahead, reflected the mood of magazines that are no longer purely in survival mode.

That said, the arts and culture magazine sector still faces significant struggles. These also emerged in the Summit through the sessions and discussion—most significantly, there were repeated concerns regarding staffing and staff time. Arts and culture magazine staff are stretched to their limit. They are also generally underpaid compared to what peers performing similar jobs in other industries (including the mainstream magazine industry) are paid. (Rowland Lorimer estimates that average salaries in this sector were in the \$35,000 range for positions with full time hours.) As a result, arts and culture magazines in Canada are not able to fully reach their potential. As the Summit attendees made clear, they are not in the position to implement many of the ideas and changes discussed at the Summit, mainly due to lack of staffing. The consequence of this is to put arts and culture magazines in a vulnerable position—opportunities for growth and reader engagement are there, but staffing models don't allow for the magazines to tap into that potential. This was repeatedly mentioned at the Summit.

Are there solutions to this overarching problem? Rowland Lorimer's report on the Canada Council benchmarks noted that while grants have slowly increased in dollar amounts, they have decreased in percentage of overall revenue. This suggests that grants have not kept up with the rate of inflation and subsequent increases in costs for everything from printing to office rates and postage. Magazines have responded by successfully diversifying their revenue so that grants now cover only 37% of the average magazine's income. But this comes at a cost to staff time and energy—magazines with at most two to three staff positions are stretched to the limit implementing their publishing programs, which include new expectations around digital initiatives, social media marketing, ad and sponsorship sales, event organizing and more.

Possible amelioration discussed at the Summit included a modest permanent increase in stable multi-year funding; simplified and faster project grant opportunities that allow for salary for additional staff for up to three years (a time frame sufficient to implement a new initiative and have it generate income to support additional staff salary outside of granting funds); grants or rebates providing opportunities for employing trained graduates for a minimum of 24

months. As discussed at the Summit, while there are many practicum students and summer students available, they often create a net drain on the staff members who provide training and oversight. Grants that allow for the hiring of trained staff for a minimum of two years would allow magazines to add staff who arrive with the skills necessary to take on new initiatives. Finally, it was emphasized that the annual conference itself, as well as increased mechanisms for arts and culture magazine peer knowledge sharing and engagement, would assist in overcoming this difficulty by increasing the knowledge base and making overall operations more efficient.

It is clear from the Summit that the arts and culture magazine industry is on the upswing, and ready and willing to take on new opportunities. At the same time, it's also clear that the industry has a significant barrier to overcome before they are entirely able to take advantage of the opportunities for growth that were presented by the various speakers. The Summit reflected this sense of cautious optimism, and hopefully moved the entire industry of arts and culture magazine professionals (including funders) toward recognizing and removing the roadblocks that currently prevent the industry from reaching its full potential.