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The Little Magazine in the Digital Era: A Startup Guide

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The Little Magazine in the Digital Era

A Startup Guide

by
Dan Chilton

An undergraduate thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degrees of

Bachelor of Fine Arts

&

Bachelor of Science

in

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Thesis Advisor
John Beer

Portland State University
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Abstract:

The primary goal of this project is to outline steps for success in the development of the little magazine (aka, the literary magazine) in today's digitally dominated world. Through literary analysis, interviews with established editors from various fields, houses, and magazines, and a consideration of my own time working with multiple publications, I've set out to offer a startup guide for those interested in delving into the impactful world of literary forums, herein referred to as little magazines.

Keywords: little magazines, magazines, publishing, literary magazines, journals, editing.

Thanks to Matthew Robinson, Thea Prieto, and Michael Seidlinger for their time, knowledge, and thoughtful responses.

Special thanks to John Beer and Juliana Chow for their guidance.

Table of Contents

Abstract 2

Introduction 5

Part I: Preparations

- **The Money** 9
- **Importance of Passion** 11
- **The Necessary Experience** 13
- **Understanding the Market** 15

Part II: Building a Brand

- **Start Strong** 17
- **Finding a Gimmick** 18
- **Establishing a Tone** 20
- **Establish Plans for Production** 22

Part III: Keeping Things Alive

- **Submissions & Acquisitions** 26
- **The Digital Era** 28

Conclusion 31

Bibliography 32

Introduction

This project, a reference guide to the startup and success of a little magazine, begins with the assumption that someone in need of this guide has a basic idea of what a little magazine is, what it does, and, perhaps more importantly, what it should do. This information is not difficult to come upon with such established presses as *Bitch, McSweeney's, Pushcart Press, Chicago Review,* and countless others having been established in the literary scene for quite some time.

This project also does not seek to offer an overview or history of the publishing and editing scenes within little magazines, as this information can be found elsewhere (for example, in texts employed and cited throughout this guide). Such a project would surely require a book-length manuscript, years of research, collections of insight from established editors in the field, and so on. If one wishes to find more information in this direction, I've included a bibliography that includes two of the most important (and well-used) books that have already done that work.

But there also seems to be a few necessities that should be stated in an introduction to such a guide as this. Primarily, offering a broad definition of the field and its purpose, especially in consideration of today's digital landscape.

First and foremost, the term *little magazine* necessitates an explanation of its own. I've chosen to stick with this phrase (over, say, "literary magazine") in agreement with writers and editors who have already done the work through which I have attained much of my research. As Ian Morris and Joanne Diaz say in their introduction of *The Little Magazine in Contemporary America,* "[w]hile many, perhaps most, of the little magazines of the past century featured poetry and fiction, many did not. We have chosen "little" to allow for nonliterary content." (*Morris* x)

This label allows for a broader picture of what these small magazines use for content, where they come from, and how they define the arts.

Another important note in consideration of the digital literary scene, is the physicality that the phrase "little magazine" imparts. That is, a magazine on a stand, in print, ready for the consumer to pick up and purchase on their way out of a grocery store. While this can be true, and often has been in the past, many magazines have moved to a completely digital format, making the term slightly heterological and possibly confusing. Those magazines that are often found on magazine racks in your local grocer are, more often than not, commercial magazines that do not fit this brand—*Times, The New Yorker,* etc.

Rather, little magazines refer to a brand of literary forum that is far less likely (read: nearly impossible) to be a commercially viable product due to the nature of the content. Anderson and Kinsie, editors of *The Little Magazine in America: A Modern documentary History,* say that "[l]ittle magazines generally put experiment before ease, and art before comment. They can afford to do so because they can barely afford to do anything; as a rule they do not, and cannot, expect to make money" (3).

Yet, the most important element I feel is necessary to note in an introduction such as this is the *why* of the thing. Why get into this realm of work if there's no potential for monetary gain? Why does it continue to exist in the first place? The points of contention that art continues to have in the face of Western capitalism begs the question.

Literary arts have historically been funneled into a select few major outlets or publishers. Even in today's world, the top of the publishing pyramid is referred to as "The Big 5" (Penguin Random House, Hachette Livre, HarperCollins, Simon, and Schuster, and Macmillan Publishers)

and they continually hold the most control over who and what gets published, as well as dictating what art is worthy to bring to the wider public.

In this literary paradigm, cordoned by capitalist misanthropists, little magazines offer a form of resistance. They exist to provide artists a forum where their work can be shared, read, and commended, without passing through the incredibly narrow gatekeeper of a Big 5 publisher that often requires higher education, the acquisition of an agent, and the completion of a sellable novel-length work (not to mention things like a sellable platform, a successful portfolio, social media relevance, and so on).

On the contrary, little magazines almost exclusively publish single poems, short stories, excerpts from novels, single photographs, digital art, and other short-hand work. There are few capitalist gatekeepers aside from one's own access to the internet (something that's quickly becoming a basic human commodity). And while these magazines still function under the (sometimes harsh) hands of an editor, often academically trained and vetted, the options are so plenty, and the curve of expectations so wide, that any writer (in theory) can find the perfect fit for themselves and their work.

Lastly, this guide is meant for anyone interested in stepping into the vital role of curating the literary arts scene. It is not meant to be exhaustive and was collected from various texts, interviews, and personal experience (all of which have been credited throughout), all in the hope that it will benefit the further diversification of the arts. Something that has, until fairly recently, been locked behind the privilege of academia and big-house publishing.

In the first section, I'll consider what preparations, experiences, and finances are necessary for a prospective editor entering into the world of little magazines. In the second section, I'll look at the design, style, and personality of different magazines, the realities of print versus digital

media, and what considerations you'll need to make when establishing a means for production. In the third and final section, I'll look at the long term—the importance of working within the community, the cycle of production, acquisition and publishing practices, and the necessity of good web design.

On a final note, I'd like to take a moment to define "success" within this world. When I began working on this guide, I (wrongly) defined *success* as synonymous with *longevity*. And while I believe that success is largely defined by the individual, subject to each of our own goals, I think a more accurate term for success here is *impact*. After all, is it not the primary goal of the arts to reach an audience and alter their perceptions; to change something about how we see the world? I also believe that terming success in this way does more justice for those magazines and editors which burnt bright and died young, impacting the literary world over just a couple issues. Perhaps it's worth asking ourselves how we define success with each new endeavor.

~

Part I: Preparations

In this section, my primary goals are considerations in how best a prospective editor can prepare to enter into this field. Of these considerations, I'll look at the financial side of things and what one's expectations should be around income and spending; how important passion as a source of fuel is in the literary world; what prior experience is and isn't necessary; and what the market place looks like (and how to look at it).

The Money

On what to expect from a financial standpoint.

I'll begin in the same way that I've seen so many other editors begin their essays on the subject of little magazines: by addressing the money side of things. Or, to be more accurate, the lack of.

Anyone considering stepping into this realm of the literary arts should know from the beginning that there is very little opportunity for monetary gain (if any at all). As a bastion of literary edge, usually existing to create spaces for writers pushing the boundaries of their art, little magazines are often kept afloat by the dime of the editor(s). Even those magazines functioning out of Universities (*The Portland Review, Epoch, The Iowa Review*), with all of their clout and financial viability, do not typically make the school any form of direct income. They are kept alive because these Universities recognize the value in maintaining a platform for budding artists as representations of their communities, or perhaps for the salient image of the avant-garde grad school program, but never for the money.

In fact, I would venture to say that one should plan to invest (or, for a less attractive word, *lose*) money in this endeavor. While there's an ongoing metadiscourse within the scene on the recent influx of pay-to-read journals, the most successful journals (loosely defined by the biggest cultural impact) have been the ones that do not tread the morally gray areas of charging a reading fee to an author who is most likely to receive a rejection letter.

Michael Seidlinger, author of nine novels and editor for multiple magazines (including *Entropy*), suggests beginning with some money to sit on (say, $5k). You never know when money will need to be spent in order to maintain the magazine's existence or which new projects will crop up that will require cash flow in order to follow through on. While this may not be possible for many writer-editors interested in establishing their own little magazine (and often hasn't been for many in the past) if possible start with some money to spend.

I feel it necessary to touch once more on the idea of paywalls and advertising spaces that will likely be considered by a newly founded magazine trying to make ends meet. Our work as editors is the labor of passion for and love of the arts. Yet, we all need to eat. Paywalls, often employed by larger publications, are one of those options to make some money. But even those larger publications struggle to retain readership and subscriptions, let alone a small magazine still trying to establish itself in the world. Still, others place the responsibility on the writer, charging reading fees in an attempt to cover expenses. In my experience, many writers will refuse to pay reading fees, preferring the countless other journals that do not charge for submissions. Lastly, advertisement space is another, perhaps less egregious option, but for Rebecca Morgan Frank, co-founder and editor of *Memorious*, it was an infringement on the arts. "...we didn't want any ads interrupting the look and experience of the magazine. We don't have to endure that in most print

literary journals—imagine ads on the same page as poems—and we certainly won't inflict that on our readers" (*Morris* 204).

Ultimately, these decisions and marketing strategies are up to the editor(s). Perhaps there are still ways to make enough money to ease the burden of running a journal out of one's own pocket. One journal I subscribe to runs an optional Patreon subscription for a maximum of 5$ a month for those willing to support their work. This subscription has the editors sending you some goodies and early access to their published material, and I can't imagine they're making much more than pocket change from this strategy.

I believe that it's worth stating once more: do not expect to make money upon entering into the world of little magazines. Expect to spend it.

The Importance of Passion

When the passion dies, the magazine goes with it.

Where money falls short, passion must take its place as the primary fuel source for the little magazine. Editors are writers and they got into their line of work to follow a passion for the literary arts—something that does not and will not make you money.

This is just as true for the University magazine as it is for the independent magazine. From 2021-22 I worked as the Fiction Editor for the *Portland Review* and quickly realized the amount of free labor that goes into these magazines. From acquisitions to copyediting, it's a part-time job and it's completely unpaid (unless you somehow consider the degree credit equivalent to a paycheck).

Yet, what I saw there was an abundance of passion. Despite the hefty workload and unpaid labor, every editor was happy to be there, else they tried it out, decided it wasn't for them, and quickly moved on. There's an undeniable joy in finding a piece of fiction or poetry that truly connects with you. That joy is only amplified when you can champion it through from the slush pile to the acquisitions meeting to publication.

Keith Gessen, the founding editor of *N+1,* explains in his essay on the founding of the journal the harsh realities of keeping an unfunded magazine alive through the sweat of a passionate editorial team, out-of-pocket expenses, and quite a bit of luck. One thing he warns about is the distribution of labor among your staff. "...inevitably the inequality of labor bled into the editorial process… It was not uncommon when the production was finished and we sent the issue off to the printer, for several of the editors to no longer be speaking to one another" (*Morris* 47).

Between 2022-23, I worked as the Executive Editor for Portland State's student-run magazine *The Pacific Sentinel.* While each member of my six-person staff was paid a stipend by the University (given as a type of award/grant), it was not a large amount of money once you started to break it down into an hourly wage. Towards the end of my time as the Editor, there was increasing friction between a couple of my staff members and one other staff member due to perceived labor distribution and pay. And those editors voicing their concerns were in the right for feeling that way. Why should they get paid the same or less as this person who is putting in a fraction of the work that they are? It's a matter of equity, fairness, and integrity of the organization that I think many underfunded (or unfunded) magazines have and will struggle with. This work often runs off of fumes and when people feel underappreciated or overused, they're likely to grow upset or even step away.

Ultimately, I made the decision to let the staff member go who had continually not been pulling their own weight within the group. It was a decision that I had not made lightly, but it was one that I believe showed respect for the rest of my team and retained a sense of internal integrity for the work they were doing.

Money will run dry—if there was ever a flow to begin with. In its absence, passion and drive must take its place. It's important to be prepared for this reality when planning your project and team.

The Necessary Experience

Experience or a willingness to learn?

Here's a question that sparks a lot of varying conversations. If a magazine seeks to find success (that is, to exist longer than the average lifespan of about two years), should its editor(s) come into the project with ample experience (professional or otherwise)?

I think that many people hearing this question would have a mind to look at the largest and most successful magazines throughout the last few decades. And if they were to do this, they would most surely find that most of the founding editors started with a college degree, experience in publishing or editing, or something akin.

There's no need to dispute that this has historically been the case for little magazines. As I stated in the introduction, part of the goal for this project is the broadening and diversification of the literary arts. I've since recognized the gatekeeper of academia in the literary community. As

there are very few resources available for those interested in entering into this line of work (even if just for a hobby), most editors have gained their experience and knowledge by having an "in."

Matthew Robinson, author, writing professor, and editor (*The Gravity of the Thing*), pointed out that while some experience would go a long way, a willingness to learn and grow is equally or more important. Literary magazines exist as long as the editor(s) have the passion and means to keep them afloat. This means that there's time to learn and figure things out.

Projects also evolve over time. Editors will sometimes revisit published works to update elements of them that they had gotten wrong at the time. Websites and formats also get updated to keep up to speed with the current standards. An editor's tastes become more refined and a magazine may find themselves accepting work that had previously not fit into their platform.

Change and growth are natural and one shouldn't be afraid to learn as they go. Surely, mistakes will be made. But those mistakes will be opportunities to learn. To better oneself.

But what experience is necessary to acquaint oneself with before taking on a project like this? Researching the roles and functions of different editorial positions and skills would establish a ground-level knowledge of what goes into editing (acquisitions, line-editing, copyediting). Studying other pre-established magazines would help to understand what the standards of the scene currently are, the type and quality of work being published, and market niches and magazine styles.

Experience, while important, is not everything and if one has the drive and passion that is so needed for a little magazine, they will find the ability to read, watch, and learn how to be the best editor they can be.

Understanding the Market

Representation and communal absences.

Little magazines have often existed and continue to exist to fulfill what a prospective editor is not seeing in the community (or perhaps is seeing too much of). This could be a desire for a specific type of writing that is being overlooked by publishers and desired by readers (say, flash fiction, a certain type of genre writing, etc). Often, new magazines come into existence to better represent marginalized communities that are being gatekept by larger publishers (LGBTQ, women writers [such as with *Bitch* magazine], or writers of color). Or it could just be that a writer wishes to uplift the voices of his friends who are struggling to find a platform.

For Charles Henry Rowell, founding editor of *Callaloo,* it was a matter of African American representation in the Deep South. "To recall the founding or origins of *Callaloo* is, first and foremost, to speak of necessity… In 1976 and before, there were no nationally recognized literary and cultural journals or magazines focusing on or available to the Black South" (*Morris* 51). *Callaloo,* still in circulation to this day, found success by spotting and attempting to remedy this literary absence.

Keith Gessen, a founding editor of *n+1,* also reflects on the discursive reason for the magazine's existence. "...we were all also interested in left-wing politics and history. We felt like there was no space for those things to come together— the political magazines we wrote for didn't ultimately care that much about literature, whereas the literary magazines that were coming out seemed intent on keeping themselves at a distance from the world. Why couldn't you have both things?" (*Morris* 38).

For a writer-editor interested in stepping into this world, it's an important step to consider what function your magazine will fulfill. For an author in a small midwest town, it may be easier

to distinguish what is and isn't happening in one's community than, say, someone living in New York City. Yet, both are equally important. Hundreds of magazines come and go each year. Some last for years before dying of bankruptcy or some other deadly element. Some last only a couple of issues, making a huge impact, before flaring out.

The most successful ones (as subjective as that phrasing is) knew the scene and what was missing from it; what was being overlooked or underrepresented. A magazine needn't be entirely unique to justify its existence but to truly impact its readers and the literary community at large, to form an interesting and engaging identity, its editors familiarized themselves with the scene and found their market.

Part II: Building a Brand

In this section, my primary goals are planning and building your little magazine. I'll begin with considerations on an initial release and the power of including established authors; I'll then dive into the style, tone, and "gimmicks" of little magazines and what these mean for prospective editors during the developmental stages of their projects; and, lastly, I'll lay out the details for establishing a plan for production (elements such as print, distribution, and further financial considerations).

Start Strong

Including work from established authors.

After developing your ideas, refining your tastes, and building out a team and means of production, you'll still be left with the last (and perhaps biggest) step in the process: the first release.

A trend that many editors of successful magazines have pointed out in their own experience is the usefulness of starting your magazine with strong writing and well-known names. While it's certainly possible to do so without the accompaniment of established authors in your debut issue, it's a strategy that many journals have used as a stepping stone. And considering the weight of a lofty name in the literary community, it's no surprise.

Lee Gutkind, the founding editor of the journal *Creative Nonfiction,* recalls the process of working through the grapevine of connections to obtain an interview (and subsequent essay) from *New Yorker* writer John McPhee. "I needn't tell you how special McPhee was and how his very name on our cover would elevate the journal and the genre" (*Morris* 150). While it took a while

for *Creative Nonfiction* to establish itself (as it does nearly all literary journals), this jumpstart was huge and its editors knew it.

There isn't much more to this. If possible, include work from established authors and artists who can help elevate your magazine enough to get it off the ground and running.

Finding a Gimmick

What makes you unique?

Most little magazines which found longevity also found a unique identity for the magazine. In an ever-changing market of aesthetics, it's important that a magazine's editor(s) find a niche or a gimmick that can be filled by establishing a new magazine.

It's up to those editors to decide what that gimmick will be, how committed to it they are, and how they will go about it. This goes from a purely aesthetic point of view (that is, how the ejournal, website, or physical print copy actually looks) to the contents of the magazine itself.

Ander Monson, the founder of *DIAGRAM* magazine, points out the importance of *DIAGRAM's* identity in its continual existence since 2000. "DIAGRAM has persisted, I think, because of its visual and textual identity: it is recognizable and fairly stable in both design and content" (*Morris 136).* He goes on to explain that each issue released conforms to its established image (conservative typography, consistent color profile, the use of a diagram or schematics as its table of contents, etc) and further cements its identity as a recognizable journal of literary art.

Another, more recent example, is the offshoot of *Hobart* literary journal, called *Hobart After Dark* (or *HAD*). A sporadic online publication with a focus on edgier literature, their editors will (at seemingly random times) open very short submission windows (say, until they finish their

six-pack of beer) and follow the philosophy of "what happens, happens." What has made *HAD* immediately popular and recognizable, is its simplistic design of white on black that sets the tone for the magazine and its editor's style. The contributors page, referenced as "every skull in the pile," and conforming to their minimalist style with black text on a white page and a pile of skulls hovering on the top of the page, only adds to their unique identity that routinely hooks writers in.

That's the keyword here: *style*. Magazines that stand out are the ones that readers will remember and return to.

Visit the website of *Forever Magazine* and you may be struck by the stylization therein. To enter the site, users first must click on a set of golden gates floating over an animated background of clouds in a blue and heavenly sky, inciting religious imagery—as if you're entering the pearly gates of eternity, treasures abound just waiting to be discovered; an exclusive membership just for you.

McSweeney's, one of the more well-known little magazines, found such widespread success through the textual stylization of each of their print copies starting way back in 1998. From afar, these copies would often match the simplistic styles of all those University *Review* magazines. Yet, look a bit closer at its bordered pages and typesetting and you'll find lines pulled directly out of a writer's notepad, anonymous poems written in the margins, and an intentional subversion of high-brow literary expectations. As Jeffrey Lependorf points out, "By holding a magnifying glass to the otherwise invisible design conceits of antique literary publishing, this journal invites readers to revel in the sheer delight of the arcane, while the design and format reflect an urbane, cultured, inquisitive, and hip readership" (*Morris* 2).

A journal's design goes much deeper than a simple cover image. It reflects upon the reader what it is they have in their hands. Whether clean and crisp to represent a frilless experience and

to differentiate oneself from today's oversaturated media, or colorful and vibrant imagery to depict the tone of the material, editors should consider what their intention is with their journal and how their style can reflect their goals and philosophies.

Consider this in choosing a name for your publication as well. *McSweeney's, Bitch, N+1, Failbetter.* These are names that you won't forget. While most creatives I know couldn't care less about the idea of marketing and branding, when establishing a project in today's breakneck world, it's necessary to spend a bit of time thinking about how your branding will get your project to stand out in the ever-raging sea of capitalist philanthropy.

Establishing your gimmick—your style—should be taken in the same sincerity that individuals seek their own brand of personality. In the world of literary arts, where magazines come and go faster than you can count them, it's important to stand out if longevity and/or impact is the goal.

Establishing the Tone

Garnering the right audience.

Tone and style—two things that are inherently intertwined yet hold clear distinctions. Whereas style implies more of a visual and graspable aesthetic (the clothes you wear), tone implies more of an attitude (the way you wear them).

Figuring out how you want your journal to look—its cover design, typesetting style, images or imageless, and so on—will be much easier if you have an idea of the stance in tone your journal will take. How will you approach the literary world? With a purist stance wherein you seek out the classic prose of writers of antiquity? Or with an eye for the experimental, the weird, and the

macabre? Will there be room for genre writing or will it lean into literary fiction? Will it take a political stance or seek to remain secular? How about a more subtle and sly understanding of humor? Or outlandish satire?

These considerations should be some of the first steps an editor is considering in her potential journal. She should have an idea of the type of things she likes to read, and thus seeks to publish, and find a vein that runs through it all and creates a form of cohesion. After all, little magazines are a form of community and returning readers (and hopefully, subscribers) will often seek that promise of continuity that a journal offers.

For *Bitch* magazine, it started with the ethos style of a zine (small circulation and self-published short magazines popular for their accessibility and low-risk overhead) that published writing about and for women. Andi Zeisler says of *Bitch's* founding that "...because we wanted *Bitch* to be similar to *Sassy* in making feminism accessible and attractive to women our age and younger, it seemed natural to aim at striking a relatable tone, where we were essentially writing exactly like we talked in everyday life. It also reflected the fact that we weren't professionals at what we were doing, and were open to growing and evolving" (*Morris* 71). This casual tone struck a nerve with a lot of readers and led to *Bitch's* success to this day.

For *The Gravity of the Thing,* they started with the simple idea that there weren't enough presses publishing weird writing. Leaning into the literary device of defamiliarization (literary device of presenting the familiar in unfamiliar ways), the tonal vein running through *Gravity's* pages more or less stays the same. This continuity in tone and content allows returning readers and writers to know what they're getting themselves into.

The *Portland Review,* like most MFA-ran literary journals, retains a tone of sincerity and seriousness. This is a common tonal vein found in University journals that exists for a reason: it

paints a desirable picture of the academically vetted writer-editor as a sincere and worthy investment of the school's resources and platform. Compare the pages of most *Review* journals to something like *Forever Magazine* and you'll see the stark difference in tone. That's not to say that this is the case with all University presses by any means. For instance, one outlier that comes to mind (and I think, partly due to the influence of George Saunders and his estranged writing style) is *Salt Hill* out of the University of Syracuse which often publishes content that feels like it's out of Alice's psychedelic rabbit hole.

As an editorial team develops their philosophies, goals, and design aspects of their project, the tone of the magazine should assist incoming writers and readers in knowing what sort of realm they've stepped into. One of the worst restaurants I ever ate at had a wine list that was four pages long, a menu that was everything from bar food to Japanese cuisine, and four specials at once. Don't try to accommodate everyone. Remember, quality over quantity.

Establish Plans for Production

Digital or physical?

While I assume that most writer-editors interested in stepping into this role will likely begin with a digital-only format (considering the low overhead and flexibility), perhaps still there are some who hold the same love for print that I do. But what things are there to consider in production? What does a digital-only platform offer an editorial team? What does the overhead of print production look like?

As mentioned, the digital magazine front offers a very low overhead in comparison to physical print journals. A magazine can be started for as low as zero dollars, which is certainly a

huge draw for many editors who are unlikely to have funding for an art project. Further, there's quite a bit of flexibility with going full digital. Consider how often people move when they have kids, get a better job offer, or just run into financial or familial emergencies. If running your magazine only requires time and access to the internet (in comparison to things like physical office space and physical distribution processes), a co-editor could easily make the transition in their own life while maintaining a presence on the project.

There's also flexibility to be had in terms of publication schedules and monetary overhead. When running a digital-only magazine, you're not locked into a monthly or quarterly production schedule. Meaning, you don't have the pressure of pushing content that you may not be happy with.

As the Executive Editor for the *Pacific Sentinel,* while my team and I had the luxury of university funding, we also had to deal with the pressures of a monthly publication. We often found ourselves publishing content, written by ourselves or our contributors, that, given the choice, we likely would not have published. Quality versus quantity. When you're locked into a production schedule that's often intrinsic with physical print, quality often suffers for the sake of meeting expectations.

Digital-only magazines also have the privilege of retrospective edits. Copyediting is hard work and mistakes are made all the time. If your magazine is entirely online, these mistakes can easily be remedied without anyone knowing the better. On the contrary, once an issue or book goes to print, any mistakes are there forever and you'll simply have to live with them.

I remember our first print issue with the *Sentinel* in the Fall of 2022. After months of building a team, establishing a means for production, reaching out to contributors for their content, editing and designing the issue itself, getting it off to the printers, and finally getting it delivered

to our office, we discovered that (among our list of mistakes) the horror that we had misspelled not just one, but *two* separate names. Needless to say, the days that followed were full of beating ourselves over the head for such an obvious oversight. But there was no means of making it right aside from reaching out to the people whose names we had egregiously butchered, and profusely apologize for the negligence—promising ourselves that we'd do better.

Despite these potential pitfalls and lessons learned, I love physical print. There's nothing like holding a physical copy of a magazine, book, zine, or journal and interacting with it on a tangible level that's just not possible with digital-only productions. And I know many prospective editors will feel the same way; intent on figuring out how to establish a means of physical distribution in order to share their love of literary artifacts.

Part of my job running the *Sentinel* was also managing our finances. In that year, our budget (including costs of printing, staff and contributor pay, office supplies, and some flexibility money) was somewhere in the ballpark of $72k a year (much larger than most journals). Each issue, printed monthly at about 30-40 pages and 300-400 copies, cost us between $1500-2000 (multiplied by nine months for each month of the academic year). We printed in full color, on thin paper that resembled other, more established magazines like the *New Yorker*.

The Gravity of the Thing, as a digital-only journal, only recently released its first physical print project in the Fall of 2022. Titled "Stranged Writing: A Literary Taxonomy", it's a beautiful collection of defamiliarized short stories and poetry that's organized and designed around biological taxonomy. According to co-editor Thea Prieto, this project was no easy task. They printed a total of 200 hardcover copies totaling a bit under $10k (including physical printing costs, contributor compensation, design software, permissions, licenses, shipping, and more). At the time of this writing, *Gravity* has made back about $6,400 from book sales. It also took the editors quite

a bit to make this project finally happen. Formed in 2013, *Gravity* established itself for the better part of a decade before investing in a physical print run. On top of this, they had some major privileges to help them along (including connections to a graphic designer and screen printer and some literary grants).

While every physical print project is going to look different, and both the *Sentinel's* and *Gravity's* budgets and project goals are fairly unique, my hope is that these examples give you an idea of what to expect upon entering into the realm of physical print distribution. There's a lot of overhead. There's a lot of pressure and stress. And there's a highly satisfying pay-off when all your hard work is delivered in a box to your door and you get to put a new copy on your bookshelf.

Part III: Keeping Things Alive

In this final section, my primary goal is the long game and keeping your magazine alive and well. First, I'll get into the details regarding submissions, acquisitions, and the cycle of magazine life. The final section of this guide will take into consideration the contemporary literary community

within the digital age: how to work within the community; the necessity of good web design and presence; and the importance of community involvement.

Submissions & Acquisitions

Acquiring and publishing contributor work.

So you've got an idea of the processes and developmental prospects surrounding the design of your project, and have an understanding of the overhead. This final section regards the maintenance of a little magazine project once it's off the ground, including the treatment of submissions, current approaches to digital submission platforms, finessing your editorial team, and the presence of a magazine as part of the larger literary community.

The first, and perhaps the most important, aspect to consider is establishing a process for submissions. Most literary magazines function under windows of time in which submissions are open to the public. This window is often, but not always, aligned by season or the academic calendar (that is, quarterly submission windows). You'll need to decide how long your submission windows run for, though this may end up being flexible while your journal establishes itself. New acquisition editors may find that they're not receiving enough content, or not receiving the quality of content they desire, and may find it in their best interest to extend the window as needed. Some journals even go so far as to have an open-ended submissions window that has no end date (and only shuts down when/if enough work is received).

These days, most journals operate through Submittable (being the current industry standard) as it's the most streamlined and user-friendly. It's also where most writers go when seeking homes for their work, and for good reason. If you're unfamiliar, I recommend creating an

account and spending some time on their website. Getting an idea of what makes this site so successful, with all of its streamlined processes, will certainly help in the development of your own processes.

Some publications prefer an integrated submission form through their own website. Rather than using a third-party website like Submittable, authors are requested to submit their work through an in-house ticket. In my time as an editor and writer, I've noticed a trend of undergraduate journals using this type of submission more than any other publications (though that's not to say that there aren't others). Though there are drawbacks to avoiding places like Submittable, such as not gaining the benefit of a major established platform that most writers know of, there are also some benefits. For instance, you have complete control without the interference of an outsourced website that may require fees or enforce stipulations. You'll have to consider what is in the best interest of your project when establishing a submission process.

But once you have received submissions from writers and artists interested in getting their work published through your magazine, you'll also need to consider the acquisitions processes your editorial team will follow.

As the Fiction Editor for the *Portland Review,* there was a traditionally established process through Submittable. Each week I, and the other readers, would read through ten submissions and vote on them through Submittable's integrated voting mechanic (yes, maybe, or no). This initial voting procedure, operating under the subjective tastes of each reader, vetted which submissions made it to the next step of discussion and acquisition meetings. If a piece had positive (or, more accurately, non-negative) votes, we each would leave personal comments for each other regarding our thoughts on said submission. By the end of the week, the section editors would use Submittable's integrated labeling feature to label potential submissions for discussion. On

Monday, the entire editorial staff would have read the labeled submissions and readied themselves for discussion regarding each (poetry, fiction, etc). By the end of each of these meetings, a final group vote would decide which pieces would be rejected and which would be getting accepted for publication. An email would be sent to the author (again, through Submittable's integrated features) letting them know what we had decided. Any and every author who sent us their work would get a letter, a standard that shows respect for the author's time and consideration.

While our process employed a third-party submissions site, the general premise will likely be the same for most magazines. Submission windows open, authors submit, submission windows (possibly) close, the work is divided up, read by the staff, and the first round of voting happens, acquisition meetings happen, and a final discussion and vote occur. These processes can and should be amended for your own team to fit your own needs.

The Digital Era

Community, social media, and your website.

From my experience, it seems that the little magazines that find the most success are those which establish themselves as a part of the community. Considering that art and literature come from (indeed, are the foundation of) the community, an editorial team should plan to give back and build up the community that has made their work possible.

Author readings and publication release parties are the two most common forms of literary events. Often occurring in coffee shops, bookstores, University campuses, and libraries, for very little overhead, these are an opportunity to celebrate alongside the contributors who may have only

gotten published for the first time. Events like these also help to put a face to the void that is the publishing scene. For the most part, writers and editors will never meet. In today's digital era, the work of publishing has become fairly streamlined and depersonalized (especially outside of traditional book publishing). By hosting events like these, you and your team are offering something that writers of all skills desire: connection.

Another essential consideration of an up-and-coming publication is its online presence. Unlike many magazines that began prior to the early 2000s explosion of the internet and social media, failing to establish your brand on the web could be what dooms your magazine. Everyone is online these days. While there persists a love of print publishing, most people are going to interact with your work through your website or social media channels before they ever hold a physical copy of something.

I would recommend building a social media presence (through whichever social media channels are popular at that time) that leads interested viewers back to your website. Social media offers immediacy and quick viewership. There, you can share the work being published in your magazine, related events, personalized postings, and other information that builds out your brand and following. The idea is to hook someone enough that they're interested in clicking on the website link to view work, order a physical print copy, or subscribe to things you have running on the site (such as email notifications and Patreon subscriptions).

Lastly, your website is your bread and butter. This is an area where I see a lot of magazines fall short. Often, websites look like something from fifteen years ago, clearly being moderated by someone with limited knowledge of things like UI design. It's almost always worth investing some of your funding into the creation of a solid website. As mentioned elsewhere, you'll want the

design to match the tone and style of your project. It's worth doing some research into other magazines and seeing what's been successful for them in this regard.

Social media and a website—I cannot overstate the importance of these two things. In this digital era of literary publishing, a project often lives or dies on this hill. Build your brand; invest in a website; consider a multimedia editor for your team who can focus on social media and website maintenance; establish yourself as part of the community.

Conclusion

Little magazines—their success and failures—are very much amorphous in their existences. Some are started on spur of the moment passions, but have seemingly been around for as long as anyone can remember; others are meticulously planned and budgeted for, but disappear after a very short lifespan; still others burn so bright that they make a major cultural impact, apparently and inexplicably appearing from thin air, before their quick or silent departure. This is simply the world

of the literary arts. It’s not a hard science, and its caretakers must be open minded and flexible, prepared for shifts, factures, and potential failures.

My hope from writing this guide was to do my best to prepare these prospective caretakers and editors as they enter into this world. A world often gate kept by academia and the major publishing houses. But, again, this is no hard science. You can be guided by magazines and editors past and present, but you must pave your own way. My hope is that I have offered some guidance in these pages and done a little part in diversifying and enriching the world of literary arts.

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