

Whispering Galleries: the small magazines

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According to George Steiner, commentary is without end. No, strictly that is not quite accurate. What he said was that it was without end “in the worlds of interpretative and critical discourse”, where there are no final conclusions. “Essay speaks to essay, article chatters to article in an endless gallery of querulous echo,” he said in his book *Real Presences*¹.

Functioning as whispering galleries is one of the things that small magazines can do very well. Inevitably, writing in the special number marking the 70th birthday of Herbert McCabe, the small magazine which jumps first to my mind is *New Blackfriars*, which Herbert edited so memorably for eleven years. However, another ex-editor, Allan White, is writing in this number about *New Blackfriars* in particular. It is all magazines with circulations of under 5,000—frequently well under 5,000—which I am writing about here (though not, I should add, house magazines or parish magazines or any magazines written entirely by the editor and his staff.) Of course, the echoes which Steiner speaks about come far faster in clashes between opposing pontificators on TV and in the newspapers than in these small magazines, but on TV and in the newspapers the echoes can get distorted out of all recognition.

What sort of future, though, have the small magazines got? Unless your name is Rupert Murdoch, if you are working in any of the communications media you are beset from time to time with fear for the future—fear of being frozen out or eaten up. It is something that goes with the job. The threat may be the bright young executive who has just been brought into the team to shake things up, or the corporation ten times bigger than yours. Or it may be the dazzling new medium which might altogether wipe out your own medium. What, for example, is Internet going to do to the small magazine?

Insecurity has, however, been part of the life of people working in the media for well over three hundred years. Three hundred years ago the threats were, admittedly, rather different from today's. (The threat possibly most feared by publishers then was the licensing laws imposed on publications by governments desperate to suppress political

opposition and religious dissent.) What is amazing is how unfounded a lot of this insecurity has turned out to be.

On the other hand, the insecurity which I feel as I venture to write about the small magazine as a category of publications is only too well founded, for I have little to start from. Many small magazines have from time to time written about themselves. For instance, when editing *New Blackfriars* I wrote a piece myself in 1987 commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the so-called "McCabe Affair", that disgraceful incident triggered off by a Roman official's failure to read a Herbertian editorial properly, a failure which swept *New Blackfriars* into the headlines and caused Herbert and his friends a lot of unnecessary suffering². And a couple of years later I see I was writing another piece, commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the founding of *Blackfriars* and the twenty-fifth birthday of *New Blackfriars*³. Autobiographical editorials like this are, however, quite different from attempts to write about small magazines in general. That has been rarely done. During the last fifty years tens of thousands of books have been published on the media and the number of articles on the media which have appeared is beyond human reckoning (well over 3000 have been printed just on the relationship between television and violence) but hardly any of them have been on the small magazine.

Of course, one could argue that this silence is evidence that there is nothing special to say about the small magazine. It is my contention that this is the opposite of the truth. First, though, something must be said about magazines in general.

The word "magazine" has a curious ancestry. It comes from an Arabic word meaning a place where goods are stored. When *The Gentleman's Magazine* opened in 1731 it advertised itself in its first number as "a monthly collection to store up, as in a magazine, the most remarkable pieces on the subjects aforementioned." Variety is, then, one of the features that make a publication "a magazine". That is one of the few things on which scholars who have tried to define what a magazine is have all been agreed: it must contain material by at least two different authors or from at least two different sources. Most editors have at some time or other written stories or articles under pseudonyms in a desperate endeavour to fill up an issue's empty pages, but at least they have tried to preserve the illusion of variety.

Scholars also agree that a magazine must be published at regular intervals—which can, in the opinion of some, be any length longer than a day, and, in the opinion of others, cannot be shorter than a week. In addition many think it should have some sort of decorative cover (though this can be as sober as the present cover of *New Blackfriars*) and have stapled or stitched pages. Here, though, we are already moving

into that world of uncertainty in which, alas, we will be staying through most of this article. One media directory lists more than 7600 different periodicals published in Britain, and another more than 8900, and the main reason for the disagreement is that some of these periodicals calling themselves magazines have a tabloid format (in other words, they are really newspapers in disguise).

All the same, one thing is fairly clear. In spite of the challenge presented first of all by radio and then by television, and in spite of the fact that newspapers now fill their pages with articles of a kind which once would have been found only in magazines, and have since 1962 even been carrying magazine-type supplements, the number of magazine titles in Britain goes on increasing. While newspaper sales have overall been dropping in the last decade, the number of magazines has gone up during the same period by about 75 per cent. At the moment more people are both reading and buying magazines.

Why is this? The answer tells us something about the small magazines as well as the big ones.

The Periodical Publishers Association commissioned the Henley Centre for Forecasting to produce for its 1995 annual conference an assessment of the future of magazines⁴. The report stated that magazines will continue to grow in importance and influence into the next millennium, and the number and diversity of magazine titles will continue to grow, despite the anticipated growth of electronic information services.

Print still has some advantages over the electronic media: in a newspaper or magazine you can much more quickly than on a screen pick out the news or articles which you think might interest you, and you can much more easily skim or study them, carry them around, preserve or dump them. These virtues, however, do not on their own explain why the number of magazines is going up.

The reasons for the boom given in the Henley Centre report will sound familiar to those of you who have been reading the recent writings of sociologists like Zygmunt Bauman⁵, or, for that matter, *The Enchantment of Sociology*, the new book by the Catholic sociologist Kieran Flanagan⁶. Though there are numerous definitions of postmodernism currently in circulation, most of these sociologists agree that features of postmodernist society include a consistent fragmentation of social identities and an even further growth in individualism, which will lead (at least among those lucky enough to be able to hold down moderately good jobs) to yet greater diversity of lifestyles, needs and aspirations and to continued expansion of leisure interests.

Here is the basic reason why it is thought that the present boom in magazines will go on: magazines very successfully meet this

enormously varied and continuously growing range of needs.

According to the Henley Centre report magazines are sources of cohesion in an uncertain world:

The traditional structures in society which segmented and distinguished between groups of individuals such as age, gender, class and religion are increasingly being overlaid by smaller groupings based on individual taste and interest.⁷

“Narrowcasting” is at present one of the most popular buzzwords in the world of media. Even in 1980 Anthony Smith was saying:

Information is reaching smaller audiences. The massive marketing of entertainment and information is being broken down into specialised elements. The individual will need to take only what he needs and wants.⁸

Today, because of the revolution in printing technology in the 1980’s—desk top publishing, on-screen make up computers, lasar printing—magazine production costs have been brought down so far that tiny niche markets yield profit from what would once have been impossibly small circulations.

The important implication of these developments for “the small magazines” is that, at least in the world of magazines, bigness is no longer the prime measure of importance and success. The circulations of Britain’s publicly-listed magazines range from well over one million (in the case of, for example, *Readers Digest* and *Radio Times*) to as little as 300—the circulation figure of, for example, *Soil Survey and Land Evaluation* and *Eckhart Review*. Obviously some magazines are commercially far more successful than others, but, if one is judging the significance and success of *any* magazine, one can no longer simply look at the size of its circulation.

Of course, statistics seem to contradict this. Of all the magazines published in the UK about 70 per cent are trade, technical and professional magazines, what have been called “the hidden underbelly of British journalism”, unglamorous but profitable. Of the remainder nearly all the ones widely known to the general public are those with circulations exceeding 100,000 (about 112, none of them religious). Hardly more than 1 per cent of all Britain’s magazine titles come in the category of “small magazine” as I have defined it.

None of these have been launched with the prime objective of making money. None of them have large enough potential readerships for the big magazine publishers to want to buy them up, though book publishers like Blackwells and O.U.P. handle the production and

distribution of some of them. They do not appear on the shelves of W.H. Smith and John Menzies, not even on the notorious top shelf. As they are normally mailed to subscribers, the majority of the population has never read any of them. Yet they have had an influence out of all proportion to their number and circulations.

About one-third of them are learned journals, nearly all of them sponsored by universities, professional institutes and professional associations. They make dull reading except to initiates, but are enormously powerful in their own fairly small worlds. Think of the number of reputations which have been made and unmade in the pages of *Mind* in the 120 years of its existence. In recent years the importance of some of these periodicals has grown even further: now some university libraries are spending as much as 70 per cent of their budgets on journals. This is the category of small magazines with the most stable future, and least likely to change in character.

Another one-third are literary magazines. Many a poet and novelist has first got into print in them. The influence of some of them—for example, the Cambridge critical journal *Scrutiny* (1932–53)—has been out of all proportion to their sales. The remaining one-third is almost equally made up of periodicals focussing on social or political issues, and of theological and religious journals, the majority of them directly or indirectly subsidised. The much-discussed underground comic magazines which have recently emerged in North America (in Toronto there is even a weekly TV programme on them called *Comic Book Confidential*) have not yet become part of the “small magazine scene” in the UK.

Except for the editors of the learned journals, the editors of these magazines tend to be very conscious of the uncertainties regarding their publications' futures; in fact, excessively conscious. A large number of them are working on a shoe-string, trembling every time paper or postage costs go up. They can hardly be blamed for toying at intervals with the possibilities of merger. However, on account of the marked individuality of so many publications of this kind a merger frequently turns out to be not a marriage but a take-over, and, because of the fairly strong feelings of loyalty of a lot of the readers, subscribers are reluctant to transfer their affections to the conqueror. *New Blackfriars* was the outcome of a successful merger, but merging is rarely the answer when subscriptions are sinking.

Absorbed in working out how to meet next month's bills, editors often forget the considerable potential strengths of the small magazine. Something has already been said in this article about the possibilities for cheaply producing low-circulation magazines which have been opened up by desktop publishing techniques, and also about the general trend

towards “narrowcasting”, a trend which more small magazines ought to be exploiting. In fact many are still remarkably hazy about who their readers are, let alone about how to “develop” their readership, how to define the character of the magazine more sharply. Far too many are still inclined to print whatever comes through the letterbox so long as it reads well, and it is these which are least likely to have any serious place in tomorrow’s world.

Where, though, if anywhere, does the small magazine come into its own?

Thanks to the influence of “the big media”, public debates must now commonly be conducted in soundbites and attitudes crisp enough to impress those with the very shortest of attention spans, and the role of the reader or viewer more often than not can only be voyeuristic, so the need is greater than ever for media in which the nuanced arguments which a minority wants can be presented, media in which there are greater opportunities for feedback. It is most obviously here that the small magazine comes into its own.

Furthermore, the small magazine can take certain sorts of risks that the commercial magazine would not. There is the possibility for “going somewhere” in a little magazine, for “opening people up” to new ideas. In the words of the provocative, much-reprinted suggestion of Philip Elliott, first written a quarter of a century ago,

mass communication is liable not to be communication at all... The factors which inhibit the broadcasters’ opportunities to communicate through the media also ensure that they will be unlikely to provide society, in Mannheim’s terms, with any ‘free floating’ intellectual challenge... the more mass the media the more inhibitions are placed on a direct communication process.⁹

This does not, of course, imply that there are no limiting confines in the world of the small magazine. If any magazine consistently breaks the boundaries imposed by its editorial policy it ceases to be interesting. Also, precisely because their circulations are small, small magazines are more sensitive to the indignation of the lunatic fringe among their readers. It is a fact, too, that many of them have to live with an anomaly: many of them are critical of the values of liberal democracy—especially of the rampant individualism it engenders—but the small magazine is itself a product of liberal democratic culture. And small religious magazines have special problems to cope with. While making daring digs at Cardinal Ratzinger and various other senior ecclesiastical executives, they can only too often be captured by the prevailing ethos of religious media in general, much of which (as Dennis Potter once suggested) merely offers us “little pellets of sweetness”¹⁰ that have very

little to do with religion. In Pierre Babin's opinion¹¹, religious communication must be startling and awakening if it is to be of any value at all, and how much of it, even in these particular magazines, is in fact "awakening"?

Crucial is the special role of the editor in the small magazine, which is different from the role of the editor of a big magazine or newspaper. Although their power varies—some of the editors are a law unto themselves, some firmly under the thumb of an editorial board—there is a lot of truth in what Peter Hebblethwaite once said to me: "A small magazine is the personality of its editor written large."

"Narrowcasting" may be one of today's buzz-words, but if what you read, what you see, is basically just what *you* want to read, to see, how likely is it that you will be "opened up"? Part of the strength of the small magazine is that not only is it "your" magazine in a sense in which no national newspaper is any longer "your" paper, but what you get is what the editor thinks will make a good mixture—a mixture containing all sorts of things you would not have chosen yourself. If this tension is lacking you are not going to be "opened up".

It is time, though, to face briefly the question raised at the beginning of this article: will Internet, which looks like the biggest challenge to the small magazine, wipe it out?

Prophesying about the future role of new communication technology is a dangerous thing to do, for social needs and economic and political interests play a critical part in determining how in fact new technology will develop. The Victorians expected that the telephone would develop as an instrument of mass-entertainment; newspaper editors of the 1930's were confident that TV would never become a news medium; in 1980 Anthony Smith predicted that, because of the arrival of teletext, by the 1990's newspapers could be facing extinction¹². In the Introduction to *The Media Guide 1996* we are told about Internet and the forthcoming "information superhighway":

The fascination is that here is a media channel with none of the conventional controls. Anyone with a computer and phone can communicate directly with large numbers of other people without having to go through any kind of intermediary. The promise is of a new species of mass media without the restrictive paraphernalia of editors, house styles or owners with their own political/commercial agendas.¹³

But without an editor there cannot be a "magazine"!

At least in the US, Internet has already become the preferred venue for pre-publication of articles, the airing of views and the testing of ideas¹⁴, and putting information on screen rather than on paper may soon

be cost effective. It is seen by some as becoming an open and democratic community to which everybody could have access. But how “democratic” is it actually going to be?

Precisely because there is no editorial control, Internet is at the moment a huge rag-bag. However, in fact in *any* media there is control. In the small magazine control is exercised by the editor, whose heart is fairly likely to be approximately in the right place, who is fairly likely to be somebody for whom ideas matter. Control in Internet, on the other hand, is increasingly likely to be exercised by a handful of giant telecommunications corporations¹⁵. (The fact that, among the magazines which are beginning to appear on Internet, the most recent is owned by Microsoft¹⁶ is no source for comfort.) Disappearance of the postal services would certainly wipe out the small magazines, but Internet is not going to be an adequate substitute for them—not, that is, for the good ones.

In November 1965, when I was a toppling agnostic, a chance glance at a piece by Ian Hislop in a copy of the current number of *New Blackfriars* lying on a table in Quarr Abbey library convinced me that I could become a Catholic without committing intellectual suicide. Yes, a small magazine has had an important role in my own life. Long live the small magazine. Long live *New Blackfriars*. Long live Herbert.

- 1 London: Faber, p.39.
- 2 *New Blackfriars*, vol.68, pp.110f.
- 3 *New Blackfriars*, vol.70, pp.410f.
- 4 *Magazines in 2000*: May 1995, for Periodical Publishers Association, 15 Kingsway, London WC2B 6UN.
- 5 For example, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, London: Routledge: 1992.
- 6 Basingstoke: Macmillan: 1996, esp. ch.2.
- 7 Quoted in Steve Peak & Paul Fisher ed.: *The Media Guide*: 1996, London: Fourth Estate: 1995, p.74.
- 8 Anthony Smith, *Goodbye Gutenberg*, Oxford: OUP: 1980, p.316.
- 9 *The making of a television series: a case study in the sociology of culture*, London: Constable: 1972, pp.164–6; reprinted in Denis McQuail, ed.: *Sociology of Mass Communications: Selected Readings*, Harmondsworth: Penguin: 1972, pp.256-8; Cf K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, London: Routledge: 1936.
- 10 Dennis Potter, in a discussion on BBC 1, 25.8.87, following a screening of his *Brimstone and Treacle*.
- 11 *The Audio-Visual Man, the Media and Religious Education*, Ohio: Pflaum: 1970, pp.155, 159.
- 12 op. cit. pp.241, 244.
- 13 op. cit. p.8.
- 14 Cf Rob Shields ed., *Culture of Internet: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies*, London: Sage: 1996, p.3.
- 15 Cf. for example, Fred Johnson: “Cyberpunks in the White House”, esp. pp.84, 87, 96, in Jon Dovey ed.: *Fractal Dreams: New Media in Social Context*, London: Lawrence & Wishart: 1996.
- 16 *Slate*, to be edited by Michael Kinsley; it will be published from <http://www.slate.com/>