

Analysis

Status Hierarchy: Magazine Print Editors and Digital Editors

On the first day of November, I found myself in a line outside an Apple store at Pentagon City Mall, Va., and I was about to get an iPad Air, the latest model. It is much lighter and said to be 70 times faster than the previous model and with iOS 7 and retina display.

It is also going to be my first tablet in life. I have waited for too long.

Advancing technology shuffles the journalism industry. We might not need to be told again, after analyzing data, studying and researching, that the business model of print journalism is dying and that the trend is to go all things digital. But how exactly is it affecting journalists working for a magazine?

Let us start with defining job responsibilities. Depending on different platforms such as the website and the print magazine, editors' duties vary. As for digital journalism, some involve creating original content such as writing a well-reported story and photography an event; some focus on promoting existing content and reaching out to the community; some might be uploading content that has been published in print to the web. Due to various tasks and the skills that are needed to finish the tasks, journalists such as writers, editors, designers and photographers view their status at their publication differently.

After interviewing eight editors at monthly and bimonthly magazines based in Washington, D.C., and New York, I found that magazine editors generally believe that

web editors are, or will soon be to say the least, as important as print editors in terms of values produced by their work. In other words, platforms will not affect how magazine editors are viewed in terms of their importance and value at their publication.

For my project, I contacted a list of magazine publications based in Washington, D.C., through email and phone calls and secured phone and in-person interviews with editors from the print side and the digital side. During the process of emailing and calling, I also reached out to my coworkers at the International Center for Journalists where I interned and got in touch with magazine contacts through that way. The semi-structured interview questions are mainly about how the editors define their job responsibilities, roles at work and differences between working for the digital and the print. I also raised questions on what they think of their status at the magazine and in the industry in general. Besides key questions, I also asked them about their career route because I wanted to get a general sense of how they got into journalism, why they wanted to become a journalist in the first place and what they think of being a journalist in today's media environment. With eight semi-structured interviews with editors from five publications, I was able to answer my research questions and analyze what the answers mean to the magazine industry.

From Office to Office

The Washingtonian

The Washingtonian is a monthly city magazine that provides guides and reviews on regional shopping, dining and entertainment. Its online presence tries to deliver similar content in a more interactive way. *Washingtonian.com* has online chats with editors, online calendar events and blogs to engage residents and visitors and people who consider moving to DC.

The publication has a rather clear division in terms of job responsibilities. Bill O'Sullivan, managing editor at *the Washingtonian*, said he is the final pair of eyes and that he reads every word that would go into print. Besides, "I help keep the trains running on time," O'Sullivan said. He would make sure he gets copies from writers and editors, coordinate with art department, work on production and solve problems along the way. But O'Sullivan is not so much associated with the magazine's online counterpart.

Washingtonian.com has its own managing editor, Tanya Pai, who would edit and copyedit all posts for the web and manage the Twitter feed for *the Washingtonian*. Pai also oversees three other publications, *the Washington Welcome Guide*, *the Washingtonian Bride & Groom* and *the Washington Mom*, and makes sure everything is accurate regarding facts and copies.

To O'Sullivan, the big difference between the print and the web is timeliness. "As a monthly magazine, we can't chase news like a news organization," O'Sullivan said. "In some sense, [the web] is looser and can get things up quicker and have a little more fun. It's more timely, gossipy and newsy than the print magazine." Pai agreed on the fast pace of the web and added that online publishing could have a different visual component.

Both O’Sullivan and Pai believed that with technology advancing, people who consume news could not live without the Internet. Working for the digital platform is an important skill and essential aspect in the magazine industry and deserves the same amount of respect. From that consensus, O’Sullivan also commented on how other elements come into play. “It’s all about the seriousness and professionalism.”

The Washington Monthly

The Washington Monthly is a bimonthly publication that “covers politics, government, culture and the media,” according to the about-us page on its website. Its editors and writers are proud to announce their independence, “We’re not a subsidiary of some giant media company or a mouthpiece for ideologues,” and that they care, “We’re an independent voice, listened to by insiders and willing to take on sacred cows — liberal and conservative.”

Because of a small staff, the Monthly’s editors are fulfilling duties for both platforms. Ryan Cooper, web editor at *the Washington Monthly*, said, “The monthly is so small that there’s not a clear division of labor.” Cooper is in charge of daily updates on the publication’s website and manages its Twitter feed and sometimes Facebook. He would put print content online every two months, which usually takes him 18 hours to finish uploading. His duties on the print side include supervising interns with fact checking and some writing for the print magazine and its blog. Anne Kim, editor of special projects, helped with editing stories for both the web and the print. Kim writes for the print magazine as well, and she also creates the publication’s weekly newsletter.

Kim believed that the web is the future. “It’s really not a matter of preference,” Kim said, “It’s a resignation that’s inevitable.” She also brought up the accessibility of the digital platform and the limitation of the print. She said a magazine is limited by its page count, word count, layout, etc., and with the web, the publication could have more possibilities in art and respond to readers much faster.

With no education background in journalism, Cooper stepped into the industry by blogging during his stay at Peace Corp. For Cooper, his job at the Monthly is a great position to start with. “You have to start from the bottom,” he said. Cooper believed there is a status hierarchy and that the web editors are at the bottom. “I’m a small fish in D.C.’s journalism pond.” However, he said he is satisfied with even having a job in journalism and believed that the media environment is changing rapidly and that there are many great work produced in the form of digital journalism.

Kiplinger

Based in Washington, D.C., Kiplinger provides business forecasts and personal financial advice with a monthly publication, *Kiplinger’s Personal Finance* magazine, a weekly periodical, *The Kiplinger Letter*, and its website.

Doug Harbrecht, new media director at Kiplinger, talked a lot about how exciting he got to grow with the digital era since 1997 when he became an online news editor at BusinessWeek.com. “I love the pioneer aspect and the thrill of seeing an industry evolve and create itself right before my eyes,” Harbrecht said, “The rise of digital journalism is fascinating.” Overseeing editorial, ad sales, business and web development, Harbrecht

summed up his main responsibilities: an operation manager of all things digital at Kiplinger.

On the print side, Manny Schiffres, executive editor at *Kiplinger Personal Finance* magazine, determines what story goes into the Investing section and what direction the article should take and makes sure that the story makes sense and reads well. To Schiffres, the difference between Kiplinger's print publications and its website is the audience. He said that because the web is aiming to attract younger readers, writers and editors have to dumb down their stories, and he would like to write in a more sophisticated way if possible.

Unlike Schiffres, Harbrecht believed that there is a status hierarchy at some publications because experienced journalists might have the inclination to hold on to the old-fashion journalism. "... But the matter of fact is that the print side is declining," Harbrecht said, "There are less and less opportunities because ad sales are declining, circulation is declining and the business model of print journalism is dying." He believed that digital journalism is a constantly evolving space and that at places that are making the effort to keep up, there will be no hierarchy any more.

At least Harbrecht and Schiffres have the same goal; they are just using different techniques to achieve it. "We have to be mindful to satisfy existing readers and also attract new readers," Schiffres said, "The ultimate goal is to get the company through this period of intense ferment in the journalism business and allow it to survive."

SourceMedia

SourceMedia, an Investcorp company, reports, analyzes, researches news, data and insights in business and finance. Scott Wenger, editorial editor at SourceMedia, supervises three publications, *Financial Planning*, *On Wall Street* and *Bank Investment Consultant*, and their websites. Wenger said he wanted his editors to work for the web and the print with balanced devotion and they don't have a person works exclusively on the digital or the print.

Sharing a similar view with Kiplinger's editors, Wenger believed that the future of the journalism is digital. "It's vital that we serve all our readers who want to get their news digitally, so we spend an enormous amount of time creating and improving our online news presence," Wenger said.

He said that he is very excited to see the next new trend in journalism unfold. He didn't believe that in journalism print editors would be regarded as the more prestigious, valuable and important positions than web editors. "It's actually even flipped," Wenger said, "If you tell people you're going to work at some big print publication, people might look at you and secretly think hope that works out and good luck with that."

Mother Jones D.C. Bureau

Mother Jones is an nonprofit news organization that publishes a bimonthly magazine on investigative, political and social justice reporting and has its website. Lauren Williams, story editor at Mother Jones, works for its D.C. Bureau and writes for the publication occasionally.

With a journalism background in writing African American culture blogs, Williams said that she enjoyed the fast pace of digital journalism. She also said that she

feels more involved during the process. In her office, everybody is fulfilling duties for both platforms. “I think in today’s media, every magazine should have online presence so that it’s keeping up with everything that’s going on,” Williams said.

From Office to the Industry

The Washingtonian is a monthly lifestyle magazine that is focused on local topics. It gives some attention to politics and current news event, but that are mostly what its website covers. *The Washington Monthly* and *Mother Jones* are more about politics and both bimonthly. Although their print version are not following daily news, their content are constantly talking about politics, such as interpreting and analyzing domestic and international policies, reporting on public figures and reviewing ideas concerned with the government. Kiplinger and Source Media could be labeled as trade magazines because their audience are extremely well targeted: people who are in economics/finance/business and who are looking for professional advices, opinions and analysis in finance.

Among the five, Kiplinger and Source Media are making an effort to attract attention and convince readers to continue browsing their website. Editors at both magazines are very much excited about how digital journalism is going to evolve and hope they could be a part of it. At these two publications, editors believe that status hierarchy is out-of-date and in the future, there will be none.

In fact, most of the eight editors I interviewed said that there used to be a higher status for print editors and a lower for web editors at some publications, but that is changing rapidly. “Online doesn’t carry a stigma as it used to,” Bill O’Sullivan of *the*

Washingtonian said. O'Sullivan also related the hierarchy to what kind of content a publication publishes. He said no one would turn up their noses at an editor who works at websites of major news outlet such as Slate.com and NewYorkTimes.com. He believed the hierarchy is more relevant to the level of seriousness and professionalism of the content a publication produced rather than on which platform the content is published.

Manny Schiffres of Kiplinger pointed out that the hierarchy could also just be different divisions of labor. When talked about different roles the web and the print side play, Schiffres said, "Their (the website's) whole thing is to get hits." Beside a big drive of traffic online, the website is also trying to attract younger readers while the print magazine has a pretty stable subscribed readers, according to Schiffres.

Another finding is that some web editors could be less involved with the print magazine production because they spend less time and energy with the story compared to how much time a print editor would be researching, editing, fact checking a story. Small-staffed magazines might work with more collaboration, but with a clear division of labor, a lack of involvement to produce a print magazine happens. How it is affecting the quality of the publication is unclear, but imagine this: if the first time a web editor sees a story is when he or she is putting the published content onto the website, he or she would have less creative ideas to contribute and less possibilities to make the story a more powerful, compelling and, more importantly, engaging one for digital news consumers.

From talking to people working for magazines and newspapers and from what I experienced working as a reporter for a daily newspaper and a weekly city magazine, I believe it is reasonable to conclude that because journalism is in the middle of transformation and the magazine industry is a rapidly changing space, editors who work

for the print publication and who work for the website and mobile devices will no longer viewed by whichever platform the magazine content is published. In ten years, the definition of web editors will not be the same as it is today. Along with magazine content shifting to the Internet, more and more people will consume news from their laptop, PC, smart phones and tablets.

With that in mind, it is fair to say that the number of print editors who produce and design to publish in physical print publications will shrink. There will be much fewer editors who are dedicated to print magazine production than editors who produce in-depth, long-form magazine stories and present them in the digital world. Although it is difficult to conclude that their status will be flipped in ten years, it is highly possible that web editors will be viewed as a more important position at a publication and will be valued more for their work.

Within a decade, magazine print and digital editors will be expected to have the skills to produce online content that is interesting, engaging and creative in the way stories are presented and displayed. The main job duties of a magazine editor, such as editing, copyediting and fact checking, will still be the basics, but when editors work to publish a story, they will be thinking first about publishing the story on the Internet, smart phones and tablets. That will be the major effort and where magazine editors spend most of their time and energy in, and publishing a magazine, through which people could flip and hold on to, will not have the same amount of attention from editors.

