SUCCESSFUL DIGITAL STRATEGIES OF FIVE LARGE- AND SMALL-CIRCULATION CITY MAGAZINES

Eliza Smith
Berkley Hudson, Committee Chair

ANALYSIS

For decades, city and regional magazines have provided service and investigative journalism in the communities they serve, all while fostering and maintaining close ties to their print magazine’s audience. But the digital revolution brought with it a wave of challenges. Were city magazine staffs — typically small and operating on tighter resources than their national, general interest counterparts — equipped to keep a website populated and appealing, on top of strict and ever-revolving print deadlines? Would placing the print content online for free cannibalize print sales? Who was this new digital audience, and what exactly were they looking for?

While many of the initial “kinks” of the digital revolution have smoothed out, questions still remain about best strategies on the web, particularly in the city and regional magazine world, where it’s become evident that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. In the 2015 City and Regional Magazine Association panel “Making Digital Work for You,” editors Emma Sullivan of Chicago, Amanda Heckert of Indianapolis Monthly and Jason Heid of DMagazine.com discussed their strategies, successes and limitations. This analysis expands on that conversation. By conducting interviews with five city magazine editors from across the country and encompassing diverse makeups — including audience reach, staff size and resources — I sought to answer the following questions: How do city and regional magazine editors strategize to meet the needs of both
their print and online audiences? What unique challenges do city and regional magazines face in the digital realm? And what are the best strategies for success at this time?

The editors who participated in this project include Jason Heid of DMagazine.com, Tom McGrath of Philadelphia, Amanda Heckert of Indianapolis Monthly, Katie Pollock Estes of 417 and Zach Dundas of Portland Monthly. These leaders were candid and thoughtful about the challenges their staffs face and offered insights that counter the traditional thinking about city magazines and their print and digital audiences. They discussed strategy changes and continued efforts to translate the best of their respective publications to the digital sphere. Their collective knowledge made clear that while there is still much to learn, there is also reason to celebrate how far city magazines have come and to remain hopeful about their future, both in print and on the web.

**The Role of a City Magazine Website**

Deciding the role of one’s website, presumably, will affect an editor’s approach to that website. First, a quick sample of how each editor views the purpose of their publication’s digital operation:

**DMagazine.com.** Heid says the purpose of DMagazine.com is to build an audience of its own separate from the print magazine’s audience. “We don’t think of it as just an extension — as *just* an extension — of the print titles we publish. We think of it as its own entity, so we work hard to keep it populated and to speak to its own audience, because it has its own audience.”
Philadelphia. McGrath says the role of the website is basically the same as print, “in the sense that it’s a vehicle for doing journalism, and from a business standpoint, it’s a way to make money.”

Indianapolis Monthly. Heckert says she looks at the website as a way to extend the brand. “It’s extending the publication of course, but it’s the overall brand. We are seeing that it brings in, in many cases, a new audience.”

417. Estes says 417’s website has always had two functions: “One is a place to connect with our readers month-to-month with our monthly content that comes in the magazine, but also to stay in touch with them throughout the month as well so … we’re reaching them as often as we can.”

Portland Monthly. Dundas says the website’s role is always evolving, but right now he sees it as a place to provide hourly and daily coverage and translate the print content to a more “elastic” audience. “We’re working conceptually to make less and less a distinction between (print and digital),” Dundas says.

A Younger, More Diverse Audience

It should come as no surprise that all five editors reported having a younger audience online. The degrees to those age differences varied. Heid and Heckert both reported an estimated 10-year difference at their publications, with D having the youngest readers (print readers average 35–45 while online readers average 25–35; at Indianapolis Monthly, it’s closer to 55 in print and 45 online). A larger divide exists at Philadelphia, with the average age of the print subscriber in their early fifties and the digital reader in their twenties and thirties.
In addition to age, the editors pointed out further interesting distinctions. Dundas said *Portland Monthly*’s digital audience skews notably more female the further you get from the subscriber core, reaching its peak online. McGrath noted that *Philadelphia*’s print audience is more suburban-based (about 70 percent), while the younger, online audience is more city-based. This makes sense, he says, as the website content tends to be more city-focused.

According to Heid, *D*’s print magazine is more focused on affluent readers, while online he believes there are more “aspirational” readers — those who want to be the affluent people in Dallas someday. Heid says the website’s focus on local events also ensures a more inclusive demographic: “Because such a high percentage of what we do is based around being a guide to the city, I feel like our website is a little bit more inclusive of a broader cross-section of the city.”

Similarly, Heckert says *Indianapolis Monthly*’s online audience is more aspirational than the print subscribers: “There may be readers who, depending on where they are in their lives, may not be ready to be a print subscriber, but through the website, we can still prompt them to appreciate our content.”

A critique of city and regional magazines — made by Katherine Fry in 1995, during the still burgeoning years of the internet — revolves around the exclusion of non-white, less affluent urban residents. Perhaps companion websites can serve as a way to break down some of those race and class barriers, particularly if acted on intentionally. As Dundas says of *Portland Monthly*’s online audience, it’s “more of a mosaic than a monolith.”

A Sense of Immediacy
Of course, it’s not just demographics that separate the print audience from its digital counterpart — it’s also what both groups are after. For Heid, the “standbys of service journalism, food and ‘stuff to do,’” are the basis for both audiences. Other editors spoke to the importance of service journalism online as well. Dundas says service content attracts digital readers, and those pieces can live on and be re-pushed when the appropriate time comes around, such as a roundup of Portland’s most popular swimming holes when the weather warms up.

For Estes, she thinks that while both 417 audiences are looking for the same content (hyper-local, service), online readers want more immediate content: “Our print readership is getting the June magazine at the end of May, and they’re looking ahead toward June, whereas our online audience is a lot more immediate. … I feel like our online audience is coming to us to find something to do and to use right in this moment.”

Estes mentioned a four-part poverty series in the print magazine that got a lot of reader feedback, but she didn’t hear as much from online readers. “Whereas something that’s like, ‘5 places to get weird waffles’ … those kinds of things get more.” She proposed two reasons for this: a sense of immediacy and shareability. “Those are things that may be more fun and exciting, and you can go act on it right now, or you can share it with your friends.”

This need for immediacy online can be a challenge for small city and regional magazine staffs. 417 is in the process of hiring two new writers who can fill the gap between “lagging” print content and up-to-the-minute current events. Meanwhile, Heid says he is still figuring out DMagazine.com’s role in breaking news coverage:

“With the print deadlines, as much as they might like to break news sometimes … it’s really online where being part of the daily conversation of what’s going on in
the city is so important. The difficulty we have competing in that space is we’re not set up to be a news organization. There’s a much larger newsroom right on the other side of downtown from us that is much better equipped to that, so we have to sort of think about what’s our role? What’s our space there?”

Heid says he tells his writers that where DMagazine.com can make a difference is by bringing commentary and analysis of the news. “I think that’s what we do best, when we do it best.”

For Philadelphia, news is one of the top traffic drivers to the website, along with daily coverage of the Philadelphia Eagles. These topics place the magazine in competition with larger staffed daily newspapers, but Philadelphia is holding its own. “We’re really trying to position ourselves as the dominant media brand in the city of Philadelphia, which means that we’re competing with the daily newspapers at this point,” McGrath says. “Now they still have larger staffs than we do, particularly when it comes to daily journalism, but that’s really what we’re focused on. Let’s compete in that arena because there’s an audience there.”

**Strategic Rollout and the Cannibalization Effect**

Perhaps the most crucial decision in online planning is determining how and when to strategically roll out the content repurposed from the print magazine. Release it online at the same time the magazine hits newsstands, and you might hurt newsstand sales. Wait too long and you risk readers not being able to find what they’re looking for online — or worse, finding outdated content instead. There’s also the matter of keeping the website populated, be it with unique or repurposed content. If the homepage is updated only once a month, what is the incentive for readers to visit?

There are enough considerations to make your head spin, but each editor has carefully observed their publication, taken a pulse on both its print and digital audiences.
and landed on a solution that feels comfortable for them. Of course, experimentation and the freedom to occasionally “break the rules” is important. Here, a quick rundown of each magazine’s strategy and the thought process behind it:

**DMagazine.com.** For now, all of the print content is posted online at once. Originally, the content was posted the day subscriber copies went out, but a concern was raised from the circulation team and publisher about the possibility of damaging newsstand sales. Because the biggest chunk of newsstand sales happens during the first weekend, the group came to a mutual decision to hold back the print content until the Monday after the first weekend of newsstand sales.

Heid says he isn’t sure he believes in the cannibalization effect — the traditional thinking that to post print content online will deter readers from buying the magazine. They don’t have good data on their digital efforts cannibalizing the newsstand, he says, but they do see one strong correlation:

“…if something does well online, it does well on the newsstand. And if it doesn’t do well on the newsstand, it often doesn’t do well online. … Now yes, you could argue that if we hadn’t put it online it would have done even better on the newsstand, but I find that difficult to believe. Most of the people who are only going to read it online and then see it on the newsstand and not buy it on the newsstand — they were never going to buy it on the newsstand to begin with.”

DMagazine.com will undergo a redesign in the near future, which will follow a more feed-based approach. Due to the nature of a feed-based website, Heid says they’ll move to filtering the print content out over the course of two or three weeks. Otherwise, the daily web exclusive content would be “crowded out” by the print stories.

**Philadelphia.** The largest of the sampled magazines, *Philadelphia* meters out the print content over the course of the month. In a unique way of giving the content new life online, they launched a weekend product about 18 months ago called Philadelphia
Sunday. Essentially, it’s a weekly newsletter with its own cover image. When you click on the digital cover image, it navigates to an online table of contents with the selections of print stories that are published online that week. Philadelphia Sunday goes out to about 25,000 digital users who have opted in.

Although McGrath acknowledges an industry-wide decrease in newsstand sales, which is without a doubt tied to the digital revolution, he also points out that the website in some ways has promoted a greater awareness of the print product:

“There’s no question that we have seen a softening of newsstand sales in the print product. I mean us and I think every other magazine in America, which is no doubt due to the fact that people are just spending more time online, on their phone or online, and just buying fewer magazines. And now it could also be because yes, we are taking some print content and putting it online and therefore people are just not spending the money to buy the actual magazine. But from an overall brand standpoint, the fact that you’re reaching a much larger audience online than we ever did in print, I think has raised awareness of everything that we do, including print.”

Indianapolis Monthly. Heckert and her digital media manager also employ a strategic rollout of the print content over the course of the month. This strategy, she says, is a response to the traditional thinking that publishing everything online at the top of the month would cannibalize the newsstand — but Heckert is beginning to notice that might not be the case. “What we’re starting to see is those audiences may be more different than we originally thought, and we may not be cannibalizing the newsstand if we release some things earlier,” she says.

While they determine if the traditional thinking still holds true, they’re experimenting with releasing content on a different timeline with different issues:

“Usually we roll out the features throughout the month, but sometimes we’ll release the cover story earlier in the month. Again we try not to do that because of newsstand, because that is something we’re still measured by, but if it’s a topic where we’re not sure how newsstand’s going to do, or if there’s a timely reason
for releasing it earlier, we have done it and not seen a huge cut into the newsstand because of that. So again this is part of an ongoing debate that we’re having right now. Does it matter, essentially?”

One example of this is April’s Best Restaurants issue, traditionally one of their bestsellers. Per usual, the issue went to subscribers and the newsstand first. There was also an event tied to the results, so Heckert and her digital media manager didn’t want to release the winners online before the event. But they knew if they didn’t, someone else would, and they would lose those page-views to another publication. As a compromise, they created a landing page that lists the top winners and prompts readers to find the full write-ups and rankings on newsstands before they are released online later in the month. “That’s something where we’re experimenting with, trying to have our cake and eat it, too,” Heckert says. “As editor, I’m willing to experiment and work with our digital media manager to try to balance those things.”

417. With their current operation, Estes says, the web team follows a calendar and budgets the month’s content over the course of the month. The thinking behind this strategy was not based on fear of the cannibalization effect, Estes says, but in keeping the website consistently populated. But living by that calendar has its problems, especially in Southwest Missouri when the weather changes on a dime:

“Because we work on print so far ahead, and we don’t necessarily know, for example, what the weather’s going to be in Southwest Missouri on a particular day, we were running into things where we were just really sticking to our schedule. So maybe we had a ‘five best sledding hills’ story coming out in the January issue. And so at some point in January, that’s scheduled to go up on the website. People love those kinds of stories, so that would get a lot of hits. But if we get a random 70-degree day in January, what we really need to be doing is not putting up the sledding story and instead having people on the web team who can go do like, ‘six parks you need to visit today while the weather’s beautiful before it snows again,’ or something like that.”
To expand their flexibility, 417 is adding two full-time staffers who will write both for print and web and be on-hand to cover current events and breaking news for the website as needed. “When things happen and we just need a body at a place so we can write about something before it becomes old news, we’ll actually have the manpower to do that,” Estes says.

Like McGrath, Estes thinks the website is extending the brand of 417, which curbs concerns over the cannibalization effect. “I definitely think if anything, we have more people following us now than we would have before,” Estes says. “I don’t think we’ve ever felt like circulation has gone down while our online readership has gone up.”

Portland Monthly. At this midsized magazine, the print content goes online all at once when the magazine hits newsstands, a strategy Dundas says they have “wrestled with.” The exception to this is if there’s a callout in the print magazine to a digital feature, in which case that feature goes live before the magazine reaches subscribers. Originally, Dundas says, they waited until the first of the month to release print content, but they caught a trend that made them adjust their strategy:

“I think the decisive factor was every April we do a real estate issue. We produce a huge batch of market stats. I think it was last year, maybe the year before, we saw that the day it was on newsstands, the previous year’s articles became our most visited articles. I would almost say it was sickening because it was just this realization, and it had never been quite so clear before, that there’s a readership that sees something on the newsstand, and whether they buy the magazine or not, … they see what we’re doing based off what they see in print, and they immediately go look for it on the website. I’m not saying that’s everything, it’s not even most things, but it’s enough significant projects we noticed that about that we decided we would just go live when the magazine goes out to the world.”

Dundas sees the print and digital products as separate units, so he’s not concerned with the website cannibalizing newsstand sales. Rather, he points to the cover as a better indicator of whether the magazine will do well on newsstands or not. He says he’s seen
the newsstands “hold together fairly well” for the past five years, despite industry
struggles. *Portland Monthly* even saw a modest increase in newsstand sales last year.

Like McGrath and Estes, he also thinks the website has the power to attract new
readers to the brand. “Hopefully the digital world is a whole new avenue to sell
subscriptions and get people interested in the brand in general,” he says. “I don’t know
how many digital readers we’re converting to print readers, I don’t imagine a ton, but
there doesn’t have to be a lot for it to make a difference.”

**Strategizing for Separate Audiences**

To varying degrees, the editors view their print audiences and online audiences as
separate groups, with some amount of overlap. How then do they balance retaining the
value of the print magazine (when most of the print content can be found online for free)
with offering their online readers unique benefits for visiting the website? The editors
weighed in on the perceived benefits for their print and digital readers, while ultimately
advising that each medium be used for its particular strengths. “I think it comes down to
trying to embrace what each medium is good at,” McGrath says. “And also trying to
understand that people may want to consume your content in multiple ways.”

**Perceived benefits for print readers.**

*A whole experience.* The print magazine, McGrath says, is still a better way to read
long-form stories, and it’s the more beautiful medium — a sentiment that several of the
editors echoed. Heid says the print magazine staff actually tries to create content he can’t
replicate online, and he’s all for that: “That’s what a printed magazine should try to do. It
should try to be an experience that’s just much more enjoyable to read on a page spread
than it is in a digital format.” Heckert also referred to the print magazine as an
experience: “We package it that way: the visuals, the reporting, the print, the writing. It’s all a part of a package and experience.”

*A forward look.* As Estes mentioned, print subscribers are getting the June magazine in the middle of May, which allows them to see what the city has to offer in the upcoming month and plan ahead. For some publications, these readers are getting a sneak peek of content that won’t be available to digital readers for several weeks, in some cases. Heckert says that in addition to being cautious about the cannibalization effect, this is a valuable perk for print subscribers, which she wants them to maintain: “While I feel that a lot of magazine readers are coming for that whole experience, we don’t want them to feel like, ‘Oh, I can just go (to the website) at the top of the month and read everything and get it that way.’”

*Perceived benefits for online readers.*

*Niche content.* McGrath pointed out that online is where the publication has the space to provide more niche content, such as the Philadelphia Eagles coverage. “We will write maybe one or two feature stories a year in print about the Eagles, but the ability to really dive deep on the Eagles every single day, for Eagles fans, is a huge benefit,” he says. “We’d never be able to do that in print, but we obviously do it online.” Readers of DMagazine.com have access to archive issues all the way back to 1974, and Heid and his staff will sometimes unearth those stories and give them new life.

*Up-to-the-minute.* Digital, McGrath says, is faster-paced — a “snapshot” of what’s happening in the city right now. This goes back to Estes’ view of a sense of immediacy, which the website is able to satisfy with stories that readers can act on right
away. Online is where readers find breaking news coverage, which advanced print deadlines do not typically allow.

**Audience engagement.** Estes says 417 has a lot of connection with their online readers in the form of contests and promotions, and participation is high. Readers have an opportunity to vote for upcoming issues, such as “Best of 417” or “20 Under 30,” and those web readers are “making their voices heard.” Indianapolis Monthly prompts audience engagement with a poll on their home page that typically relates to a recent print story. Many of the editors also mentioned live events in their communities, which both print and digital audiences have an opportunity to join. Photo galleries from those events also feature prominently on several of the sites, featuring readers.

**Readers choose level of interaction.** Heckert and Dundas both mentioned that they’re seeing different audiences interacting with different parts of their websites — in other words, the readers are picking and choosing what interests them. Digital readers also assert their agency through the newsletters they subscribe to. “I know there are some readers who only get one of our email newsletters that might be about food or the culture scene or style and shopping, and they only engage with us through that,” Dundas says. “There aren’t very many, but there are a few that that is our only presence in their lives.” Of course, print readers can also take and leave the content that interests them, but websites and newsletters have the added benefit of customization.

**Unique Challenges of City and Regional Magazines**

There’s no denying that with small staffs and limited resources, city and regional magazine editors face multiple challenges when strategizing their publication’s digital
operation. A sampling of challenges were discussed in the interviews, most of which derived from those staffing and budgetary issues.

“A never-ending news hole.” All of the editors pointed to the “volume-driven” nature of the internet as a cause of concern, as opposed to the finite amount of space in the print magazine. “If you wanted to strip it down and be very unromantic about it, it’s a volume-driven business,” Dundas says. “Individual blog posts and stories may not get huge traffic, but if you put them all together they add up to the audience.”

Heid refers to this challenge as “a never-ending news hole.” He also says it’s difficult to know when your approach is the right one. “There are so many unknowns,” he says. “We can get a feel for how many posts a day should this channel have, or this channel have, or this channel have. But it’s difficult to know for sure that this is the right thing to do.”

Dundas thinks they’ve found a good balance at Portland Monthly. They don’t demand a certain daily quota or evaluate staffers by the traffic his or her posts generate: “What we do is say, this area of coverage exists, this blog exists, it has an associated email newsletter. In order to be a viable thing, it needs to have this many posts per week. Beyond that, whatever you can do is great.”

A further element of this never-ending news hole is staying in touch with your audience in a constantly updating media environment. Like Estes says, if you’re not staying in touch with your readers, they’ll go elsewhere. “With all of the digital content, if you are lazy about it and things aren’t going up often enough, you’re going to lose people,” she says. “They’re going to find something else to read and something else to do if you’re not constantly pinging them with things to pay attention to.”
**Potential for burnout.** Of course, a volume-driven website puts pressure on the editorial staffers, many of whom — and in these publications’ cases, most of whom — also have print responsibilities. *Philadelphia* has the largest print editorial staff at 28, about two-thirds of whom also have a role with the website, which publishes about 50 pieces of online-exclusive content per day. “There’s probably too much work for too few people at this point,” McGrath says. “Because you’re asking people to post a large amount of content on a daily basis, and for a fair number of them also still pay attention to what’s happening monthly in print, and it’s just a lot of work. So we have a tired staff at this point.”

Heckert admits this is the way the magazine business works now, but mentioned that it can be an added challenge for those staffers who didn’t always have digital responsibilities:

> “Frankly, when you go to apply at a magazine like mine, I think it’s just part of the job description. You’re going to be working on digital. But a lot of my staff, and this is probably true for a lot of magazines, were here before the digital revolution came. So they’ve had to integrate that into their job descriptions. I’m already asking a lot of them. It’s finding that balance. And certainly as their manager I’m always trying to be cognizant of that workload, trying to find financial resources so that they can outsource those online duties.”

As 417 works to ramp up their online coverage, Estes said they’ll be asking for more and more from the editorial staff, and she knows that change will be difficult. But fortunately she has a team of “yes people,” she says, who are excited to make a change.

**Social media.** Heid was the lone editor to mention social media as a challenge. As the editorial director of DMagazine.com, social media strategy presumably weighs more predominantly on his mind. Heid says not all of their online audience is coming directly to the website, so they have to reach out to them via Facebook or other social media
channels — but those channels are constantly in flux, which makes it difficult to know where to allocate resources.

“It seems like every week, there’s some new social media platform that we’re supposed to care about. And then increasingly, social media platforms as they gain power, like Facebook, are trying to get publishers to publish articles directly to Facebook. And that creates a challenge because that’s a manpower issue. How do we create the same amount of content, but then also sort of tailor it for five different channels, or six different channels, and which are the channels that we should really care about? … You know how these platforms come and go all the time. They wax and they wane. Snapchat is up right now and Twitter is down. But does that mean we shouldn’t care about Twitter anymore? I don’t know. We’re just trying to figure out this game.”

**Translating features online.** Many limitations come down to a lack of resources, such as the ability to translate a large feature online in a beautiful and complex way, a challenge that Heckert pinpointed:

“Going back to a magazine being an experience, we design it that way. It’s got all of these little bits and pieces that make a package fun. When you go to try to translate that online, unless you take that extra step of really developing the kind of landing page that maybe some of the bigger magazines are doing … you have all these little bits and bobs that make up a package, and sometimes they seem out of context when they’re not part of that whole. So that’s what we’re debating now, because in the meantime we don’t have the resources to every month blow out a big digital presentation of these packages. … But absolutely I think that we as a magazine need to have a way that we can present those packages that we’re working so hard on so that they sing digitally just as well as they do in print. And that again just goes back to resources.”

Estes reiterated these feelings. She says that most of what goes in the front of book translates easily to web, but features are an added challenge: “The web team tries to make those things look as nice as they can online, but they’re never going to be as beautiful as they are in a magazine.” Part of this goes back to embracing the medium, and most of the editors are in agreement that a feature is going to be more attractive in print, which is a perk for those readers. Even Heid, a digital editorial director, says the print magazine should try to create a unique experience that can’t be replicated. Regardless,
beautiful features can be created — and features that make sense as part of a whole — if the staffing and financial resources are available.

**Analytics.** One factor that did not come up in detail is how the editors assess reader response to the print and digital products, be it via analytics tools, social media activity, focus groups, surveys or otherwise. But as a whole, the toughest question to answer was in measuring the overlap between their print and online audiences. None were able to give a definitive answer. It seems likely that national, general interest magazines have more resources to analyze their audiences and respond accordingly in order to constantly increase page-views and print sales.

**Strategies for Success**

Perhaps the most comprehensive strategy for success is to follow the editors’ earlier advice of embracing the medium you’re working with. In the case of a city magazine website, that means identifying and providing niche content of interest to your particular regional audience; providing up-to-the-minute coverage of breaking news and quirky weather patterns; and engaging your audience through digital tools such as contests, promotions, polls and social media. In addition to these approaches, the editors identified several more strategies for success.

**Newsletters.** All five magazines use newsletters to engage with their audiences and promote content, and each reported seeing high open rates on these digital elements. To varying degrees, responsibilities for the individual newsletters rely on the editor who heads the corresponding section in the print magazine. According to Estes, newsletters are particularly useful because they’re “low impact in the effort it takes to create them” but “dense” in terms of usefulness.
Interestingly, Heckert drew a possible connection between the popularity of their top newsletter, The Dish, with how well their dining content does online. Unlike most of their other newsletters, The Dish is weekly, so readers are more frequently being pushed to that content. It’s hard to tell if the newsletter is the reason behind the increased views; food tends to be a traffic-driver for most city and regional magazine websites.

**Maintaining authority.** The same could perhaps be said of any publication, but maintaining authority — and similarly, credibility — is paramount to a city or regional magazine’s success. This is the overlap Heckert sees between the print audience and the web audience: a trust in *Indianapolis Monthly*.

“…what is allowing us to be successful and continuing to grow those numbers, the binding thread is our authority. And that’s an authority we’ve built through the investment of time and resources, both financial and just building it out. Many city magazines rely on their authority. It’s something that we’ve cultivated over the decades, that people trust what we’re saying. I think that is something that is common between what does well online and what does well in print. It’s that authority we bring to it.”

Similarly, Heid brought up maintaining credibility, particularly when it comes to product-based revenue streams on the web. “You have to balance the potential for revenue and things like that against maintaining your integrity and your authority,” Heid says. “If the reader starts to detect that you’re anything like a pay-for-play, or you’re only putting something up because the company’s going to make money on it, then you’ve undermined your credibility and the value of both the journalism and the service journalism that you do.”

Heid added that it’s important for magazines to continue to explore different revenue channels, but they must make sure, as they do in print, that they are transparent with readers about what is sponsored and unsponsored content.
**Digital gatekeeper.** Most of the magazines involved have a point person in charge of the magazine’s digital operation, though all serve under different titles: digital media manager, digital director, digital editor. Heid is the editorial director over DMagazine.com. The editors spoke highly of these staffers — Heckert used the term “gatekeeper” — and they are clearly an important element of keeping a city magazine website up and running.

Particularly at *Indianapolis Monthly*, the digital media manager is one staffer who has a foot both in editorial and advertising. Heckert says he manages the divide well:

“The impetus is really on him, and I think he does a very good job of this, of really keeping on one side of the fence and not letting there be crossover. So he’s really great about going on sales calls and being an advocate for editorial on the website and helping them come up with advertising packages, but also is a huge support system for the editorial side and does all of our social and that sort of stuff.”

As part of *417’s* revamping process, the digital director, who has a background in journalism, will be generating a lot of the online-exclusive content. Dundas says Portland’s digital editor isn’t “off on her own internet island” but stays highly involved with print and even writes for the magazine occasionally. “We have the digital editor because it has proven to be really useful to have one person at the nexus of content and social media and all the things that bring it together,” Dundas says.

**“Taking it that extra magazine step.”** Heckert says she knows online readers aren’t coming to *Indianapolis Monthly* for their daily news; they still rely on their local newspaper for that information. So when the time comes for the magazine to cover a story the newspaper is already on top of, they have to go a step further:

“When we do original content on the web, we think about, how can we present this in such a way that it brings our editorial voice to what we’re doing, that there’s an angle we’re taking? That’s something we think about a lot because we
want it to not just be, OK we’re covering something that’s the news of the day, but we’re taking it that extra magazine step and bringing something more to it, whether it’s a particular angle or more reporting, that sort of thing.”

Bringing it that “extra magazine step” is what separates a city magazine’s news coverage from the traditional newspaper take. As Heid says, editors must ask what their publication’s role is in each breaking news situation.

**Experimenting with audio and visual.** The internet is an ideal platform for visual and audio storytelling. Dundas says *Portland Monthly* recently (and quietly) launched a podcast with low-budget techniques: using an office for a recording studio, buying inexpensive microphones and interviewing people who, for the most part, they’re talking to for print stories. Dundas says they launched the podcast simply because the editorial staff wanted to give it a go. It’s so new that they didn’t develop a sales plan behind it; rather, the sales team is just now being briefed in case the endeavor goes well.

Dundas and his staff are unsure about the podcast’s success, but experimentation is key toward finding the digital elements that do work. “What I don’t know, and which I think people have had some mixed experiences with in the city magazine world, is how big a local audience there is,” Dundas says. “Obviously if you get something like Serial or The Believer, anything that has a national audience, you can hit a number that makes a lot of sense. What I don’t know is if there are enough *Portland Monthly* readers who are also podcast listeners to make a very big audience for it — but we’ll find out.”

**Learning from others.** As evidenced from the 2015 CRMA panel, “Making Digital Work for You,” which was the impetus for this research, city magazine staffs are still learning from one another in order to optimize their digital operations.
Heckert credits being part of Emmis Communications as a crucial factor in Indianapolis Monthly’s success. “There’s a lot of idea-sharing between entities,” she says. “The digital media managers have a call every month where they’re sharing ideas. Our digital media manager is having a meeting every week with our corporate digital person. So there’s a resource there and some shared expenses that make it easier for us to work with our smaller budget to do what we do with our website.”

Dundas says this idea sharing will remain a critical part of creating successful online strategies: “Honestly, I’m sure that we’ll all just be figuring it out forever.”

**Conclusion**

If there is one conclusion that emerged from this research, it’s that city and regional magazine staffs are adaptable and resilient in the face of unique challenges and tough industry struggles. With each roadblock, editors are quick to develop strategies to steer their publication in the right direction.

By first determining the role of their websites, editors can then strategize the rollout of content to reach larger and more elastic audiences while simultaneously keeping an eye on an unpredictable newsstand. They continue to embrace the medium in order to deliver a sense of immediacy, fulfill the needs of dual audiences and interact with readers. They experiment with digital elements, learn from likeminded publications and rely on their digital gatekeepers. They are invested in their communities and in providing in-depth service and investigative journalism to those communities with a voice of authority.
While remaining cautious and realistic about the magazine industry as a whole, the editors I spoke to all seemed to be optimistic about their publication’s print and digital endeavors.

“I would say, and I say this with a major knock-on-wood feeling because I don’t want to be cavalier, but I think so far (the website) has only done good things for us,” Dundas says. “I feel really lucky that I can say that right now because obviously the industry as a whole has been very challenged by the adaptation to the digital world. I also say that as someone who loves print and is very committed to making a great print magazine. I don’t think those two have to be in conflict.”

**Possibilities for future research.** Throughout the course of my interviews, national magazines rarely made an appearance, save for a quick mention of New York Magazine’s impressive branding strategies. This was, of course, a discussion of city and regional magazines — but as city magazine editors learn from one another, one can assume they are also taking note of national magazines’ digital strategies in order to inform their own decisions and innovations. In what ways and to what extent national magazines influence (and even inspire) the digital strategies of city magazines would be an interesting topic for further exploration. Finally, a survey of the analytical tools city publications are using to assess reader response would fill a gap in this research.