

# County Magazines: pride, and a passion for print

Clare Cook and Catherine Darby, University of Central Lancashire

## Abstract

This article examines why county magazines are bucking the trend to online publishing by actively prioritising print products over digital extensions. The printed county magazine is proving buoyant despite widely acknowledged difficulties in the publishing industry as aspirational advertising still commands a premium. Content is engineered in a way that would not be possible online to create a utopian version of county life which is publicly consumed. This paper examines the capacity of the county magazine in print to create brand communities that flourish thanks to distribution and content which champions their readership. It uses case studies of county magazines in two neighbouring counties to analyse why their publishers see a bright future for print, and why they view as unimportant the challenge of moving their successful formula from the coffee table to the PC. There are nearly 300 county, regional and local magazines around Britain, with upwards of six million readers per month (Brad 2011), yet this vibrant sector has received little attention from academic researchers. County titles, with their high production values, aspirational content and positive local coverage, offer an instructive contrast

to newspapers' steeply falling circulations and profits. This paper examines the potential of county magazines to fill the growing void left by the negative crime and cuts fare of regional newspapers and offers insight into how their visual and tactile pleasures are not being translated to the fragmented virtual world of the internet. It also presents the opportunities afforded by county magazines to students as case studies through placements and employment in a diminishing local newspaper landscape.

KEY WORDS: advertising, brand community, county magazines, digitization, hyper-county, niche,

## Introduction

**This article examines why county magazines are bucking the trend to online publishing by actively prioritising print products over digital extensions.**

This significant sector of the magazine market provides a useful counter-example when teaching digital journalism or discussing the decline of print journalism as the brand communities examined here can enhance students' understanding of the business of the media industry, notably the role of advertising and development of brand extensions. As we argue below, they are a distinctive market, where the usual rules often do not apply, and can therefore be used in exercises on writing to meet the needs of a targeted audience, or feature writing and lifestyle journalism more broadly. As this article demonstrates, county magazines provide a stimulating case study of the challenges of translating successful print products into profitable online operations. Finally, county magazines offer opportunities for work placements, freelancing and even jobs. Students at Staffordshire University write, take photographs and design a double-page spread for a county magazine every month, to the mutual benefit of the students and the publisher, while eight out of 22 University of Central Lancashire magazine students 2012/13 went on 11 placements to nine county magazines and subsequently analysed them for their industry assessment.

County magazines are part of a provincial magazine tradition stretching back to the eighteenth century. They developed into a format we would recognise today in the 1930s. The largest publisher of the genre was English Life Publications, based in Derby, which launched five titles in the 1930s and eight in the 1940s, including Lancashire Life. Many began as rather serious, scholarly publications, or aimed to promote economic development in their counties, but by the late 1950s most had embraced the consumerism of the post-war boom. In the 21st century the biggest player in county publishing is Archant Life, based in Norwich, which publishes a million copies of its 30 titles every month.

They are typically printed in full colour on glossy paper with features-led editorial content. Topics include people and places, natural history, the countryside, walking, arts and crafts, gardening, eating out, fashion, property and interiors. County magazines are distinct from lifestyle magazines due to the geographical focus of the content. However, where they have traditionally focused on the entire county, there is currently a shift to divide areas into smaller niches by either distribution models or content selection. For the purposes of this paper, this trend is known as hypercounty publishing.

County magazines have been the staple of newsagents' shelves and coffee tables since their advent in the 20th century. In the early 21st century they are now also available to buy in print form at supermarket check-outs and garden centres, while some are delivered free to your door (if you have the right postcode). This article maps how county magazines are proving buoyant in print, capable of stepping onto turf previously dominated by local newspapers, and the challenges they face online.

The county magazine "is thoroughly middle-class yet rooted to place ... Few other genres address the county as a geographical category, and county magazines contain useful information of a kind not found in newspapers" (Hobbs 2012, 26, 25). Unlike the eclectic national magazine *Country Life*, county magazines place "greater interest in people rather than things – buildings, antiques, animals and sport" (Hobbs 2013, 7). County editors cite this trend as evidence they are becoming more of a people's magazine.

The market highlights the sense of place in a fascinating and neglected sector of magazine publishing. In 2011, the sector totalled 277 county and regional magazines across Britain, third in popularity behind leisure interests (421) and then sport (283) but ahead of women's magazines (227) (Brad 2011). This multi-million-pound publishing genre boasts a monthly readership in the order of ten million.

However the county magazine sector remains an under-researched academic area with much of it biased towards exploring it as a celebration of county life (Colbeck 1993, 109) and as general constructs of the consumer magazine sector (Riley 1993, 25; Consterdine 2002, 21). Consterdine also asserts the importance of the county magazine as carrier of deep psychological values of self image within a "geographical boundary that is hallowed and prestigious" (19). In this respect this study offers a timely assessment of how county magazines are formulating their priorities in the digital age. Consumers' demand for printed magazines has increased by 4.1%, according to a survey by the Professional Publishers Association (PPA 2010). The Publishing Futures survey, which asked 101 companies for plans for the near future, also found that turnover was predicted to increase by 6.8%, with print contributing 86% of total revenue for consumer publishers.

The success of magazines is maintaining reader engagement and loyalty by the quality of the content. Jann Wenner, Rolling Stone co-founder, told the US Advertising Age about the advantages of quality reads and design:

Magazines are going to do just fine despite the internet... Because there's a real advantage to getting a print product and having something you can hold and that of course is portable and has a luxurious feeling and is comfortable and immersive (Ives 2011).

Indeed readers relate to print as "physical and aesthetic objects" offering a different experience and meaning (Ytre-Arne 2011). As Jane Reed, former editor of *Woman* magazine, noted: "A magazine is like a club. Its first function is to provide readers with a comfortable sense of community and pride in their identity" (Winship 1987:7). The idea of the club has been developed by Davidson et al (2007), who demonstrate that the similar marketing concept of the brand community fits magazines neatly. Their interviews and focus groups

found that five factors - strong brand image, hedonistic associations, established history, ability to be consumed in public and a competitive market – created groups of loyal readers among whom “the concept of imagined community is played out within the context of magazine consumption” (Davidson et al 2007, p219).

Abrahamson believes that magazines are a highly distinctive form of media, that what is unique to magazines is they:

not only reflect or are a product of the social reality of the times, but they also serve a larger and more pro-active function - that they can also be a catalyst, shaping the very social reality of their sociocultural moment (Abrahamson, 2007, 667).

It can also be argued that magazines do this in ways that other forms of media do not because magazines enjoy a unique closeness with their audience, their fellow members of the brand community.

It is this engagement which sustains the attraction of magazines for advertisers.

The magazine environment delivers a reader in the right frame of mind to be receptive to the advertising. In the sympathetic context of the right magazine, the strong positive brand values of the magazine can transfer onto the advertisements (Consterdine 2005, 6).

This is compounded by their tactility.

The design and feel of glossies connote luxury and pleasure, despite the fact that their sale price is relatively low. They have high production values – the heavy glossy paper from which they derive their industry-moniker enables the reproduction of sumptuous photography and graphics, providing the reader with a sensuous experience. The physical feel of these magazines and their visual layout offer pleasures over and above their use value in terms of informational content (Dyson 2007: 637).

However publishers are increasingly exposed and sensitive to wider changes in consumption options open to readers in the advent of online publishing, mobile and tablet. Taking all the above into account, this research assumes that the path travelled by online magazine journalism, although relatively short in time, has been intense in experiments with new genres and platform. This is further sensitized by a generally gloomy prognosis for the future of the print format evidenced by plunging national newspaper readerships (Press Gazette 2011a). The National Readership Survey to March 2011, for example, showed circulation falling by 12% for the Independent and the Financial Times and 15% for the Times.

Primarily, there has been a fundamental shift in publishers’ perceptions. As Dennis CEO James Tye said at the Publishing Expo in March 2011 (Cloake 2011): “We are not on the verge of change, we are ten years in. We don’t talk about print or digital any more – we’ve moved to a brand model. We think about total revenue and total profit from the brand.” Building on the database of end-users was identified by publishers as the most important digital activity, to increase revenues from digital ad sales, sponsorship and e-commerce. Brand extensions such as live events, data and reader services the province of county magazines are also expected to grow. Total UK online advertising spending surpassed £4billion for the first time in 2010, driven by social media, mobile and video (warc.com). Since 2008, digital revenue for Archant, Britain’s largest county magazine publisher, has grown despite the recession, and is expected to continue. The company’s magazine division, which owns Lancashire Life and other county titles, recorded a 3% increase in revenue to £44.9m in 2010, assisted by progress in subscription copy sales, up 9.9% in the year (Press Gazette 2011b).

This is in contrast to the revenues of county magazines’ print neighbours, local and re-

gional newspapers. For the counties covered by this study, ABCs for 2010 show across-the-board falls: for Cumbria's News and Star circulation was down 6.6% (to 10,849) and 6.2% (4,235) in the east and west of the region respectively in the six months to December 2012. The daily circulation of the Lancashire Evening Post fell by 15.3% (to 18,705) and the Lancashire Telegraph declined by 9.5% (to 20,076). Publishers have moved to close and merge regional offices, while some analysts predicted that half of all regional titles would close by 2013 because revenues would collapse by 52% (Guardian 2009). In 2011 Guardian Local announced its withdrawal from the local newspaper patch, after a two-year digital presence in Leeds, Cardiff and Edinburgh citing that the project was "unsustainable in its present form" (Pickard 2011). The crisis in regional news is blamed on the recession, a rise in online search advertising and loss of classified revenues, several structural factors including the take-up of broadband, local governments deciding in 2004 to cut recruitment advertising from local and regional papers and the Royal Mail ending the delivery of local papers. The sector has also been put under increased pressure from new start-ups and a growing trend towards hyperlocal journalism online, such as Ohsowe and Mytown, where user-generated content is mobilised around cheap digital publishing platforms.

## Methodology

Based on the context described above, this article focuses on the experiences of county magazine titles in the two counties of Lancashire and Cumbria in managing printed products and the potential for digital expansion. It does so by adopting a qualitative case study approach because of its value for obtaining a range of insights into how and why (Wimmer and Dominick, 2006; Yin, 2003). The titles in these two counties offer a sufficient range of competitors and new launches to provide a rich and engaging study both historically, between free and paid-for titles, and comparing county titles of different reach. The more industrial county of Lancashire has a population of 3.4million (ceremonial county, Office for National Statistics 2012). The predominantly rural county of Cumbria lies to the North and, with a population of half a million, is one of the most sparsely populated counties in the UK (Young and Sly 2010). The diversity of the sample was felt to enhance rather than hinder the overall outcome of the study as a direct comparison between titles was not sought. An appendix, detailing the print and digital activity, assesses the range and scope of content. This acts as a snapshot of trends in digital activity by county magazine titles.

By way of interviews with editors and managing directors, the study gauges elements common to many similar production methods and magazines. The semi-structured interview was designed with open questions in two halves (questions on the print product and digital extension), lasting around an hour and a half. Interviews were allowed to progress freely in order to explore a range of issues and stimulus to strategy, issues and activity. Notes were taken and responses written up. A quantitative assessment was also discussed with the interviewee to snapshot the activities being taken online. These were checked and explored online and collated into a spreadsheet in a way to complement the interview responses. Digital activity was categorized in four main ways: content on the website (blogs, photo galleries, video, what's on, contact details and articles); activity on social platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, a newsletter, subscription available from the website); interaction (reader photos, reader posts, reader blogs, a digital edition); and advertising (display and classified). This acts as a snapshot of the digital activity by county

magazine titles at the time of the interviews in 2011. The titles detailed in the paper are set out in the appendix.

## A formula to capture the essence of county living

The Lancashire and Cumbria county magazine sector is currently experiencing mixed fortunes in print. Editors base this view on the profitability of the printed county magazine business model, but report that competition for advertising remains fierce while aggressive subscription offers compete for reader loyalty.

The representation of county life in a printed product works on creating a pertinence between aspirational content, readership and distribution models. The 150th edition of Cumbria Life, with its golden yellow daffodils and close-up image of an innocent spring lamb, encapsulates the heart of county magazines and their attempt to relate to readers: this is county life at its best. The iconic glossy cover photography in Lancashire Life of a dreamy rose-clad white-stone cottage baking in crystal blue skies is sensual and appealing. The cultural significance of mirror-glassed lakes or elegant churches appeal to the heart and soul, pulling on the tension of reality. County life here is versatile and resilient, warming and welcoming.

County magazines abound with feel-good images and stories; the content is conservative with a small c, and comfy. Much of the hard news world with its uncomfortable realities is excluded. “We are selling a dream. There are no homeless and there’s no AIDS,” said Anthony Skinner, editor of Lancashire Magazine. He added: “People want to be in a bubble. There is a large body of people who don’t want to read anything horrible. If we criticized people’s area they would be up in arms.” Content is carefully constructed around tightly edited flatplans to ensure the area in which people live is enhanced to be seen in a utopian light. The fine tuning through editorial processes and selection make for a leisure-mannered read that is a marketing slogan for the county. Editors cite the need to create a brand that champions an area, creating a sense of belonging.

This is the world of ambassadors, charities and local heroes. From style, fashion, gardens and homes, cooking and history, the content of county magazines is brimming with the good life. Here the pages are filled with weddings, stories of local “do-gooders”, what’s on and events where readers can look for help in formulating their leisure time. Lancashire Life’s media pack extols the virtues of being “the authoritative voice of its people and an outstanding guide to its places. At its heart is history and heritage, reflected in beautifully crafted pages charting all the positive things happening in our towns and countryside.” Northern Life is “an ideal opportunity for readers to celebrate their northern heritage past and present”. Live Ribble Valley is “Lancashire’s premier guide to luxury living” while Carlisle Living has “style in the city, pride in the city”.

Like most consumer magazines, neither the free nor paid-for county titles make any serious attempt to tackle the hard news agenda of social or political issues, in contrast to local and regional newspapers. Content is designed to make areas look good and the people in it look good. The format is about flattery to the cities and towns. The content is centrally aimed at being engaging to local people and removing any national irrelevance, described by Consterdine as making “living where one does more significant and dignified” (Consterdine 2002: 21). Editors repeatedly cited their primary role as creating a buzz or a vibe around the area, championing the glamour, the good and the gracious. In older parlance this is snobbery, but it is accepted more commonly now as aspirational content. County

magazines' brand community fulfills a different role from their newspaper competitors.

The editor of Carlisle Living, Richard Eccles, saw the positive filtering of content as a way of leading the area towards a brighter future:

You read Tatler society pages and it matches what we do. We have created a club that you want to be part of. There is still the kudos and stayability of being in the magazine in a way that having the picture in the newspaper used to be kept and treasured. This creates a sense of 'missing out' if people do not have a copy of the magazine. People love this in a way they haven't felt about newspapers in a long time.

The construct here is not about falsifying editorial for fantasy but rather promoting areas for the greater good of the community and local business. Unlike online overload, content has been highly edited and selected. In addition to their traditional role as recorders of county life, its events and heritage, the county magazine is currently enjoying something of a revival as the content is steered towards people and people's news. Editors cite the role as being more about "networks" and a who's who, taking on the human interest stories in an empathic way.

Readers are often aware that a powerful filter of life in the area has been engineered. But the reader has a vested interest in the community, either through property ownership, children or grandchildren at school, or familial heritage ties. It is a world the reader wants to be part of and to believe exists. The readership of county magazines are almost exclusively ABC1 households, predominantly AB, often with a stake in the community be that from pride or practicality, with a broad age range from 25 to over 40: this is the world of village worthies.

Social photography is a significant means of fusing content and readership. This perspective gives an insight into how readers find themselves drawn into this world of aspiration: not only do they want to buy the print product to see their image but they want to be seen in a luxury product for all the prestige it can bestow. Professionally taken photographs of evening dinners, balls, races and proms perpetuate the virtuous cycle: the county magazine becomes the enhancer taking time and effort to get it right. Staff support brand extensions events which involve them in the community. In turn, the who's who network is perennially strengthened when those who are featured are mums, daughters, granddaughters, friends, colleagues, aunts.

The relationship between the reader and content is complex. Interaction with the print product is particularly evident in photographic contributions, with many hundreds of readers sending in pictures for reproduction in the printed magazine. However Lancashire Magazine editor Anthony Skinner noted:

It's a bogus idea that there is interaction with the readers. They don't want it. They want to interact with coming to events, wine, food, privilege cards - real life things not just 'telling us what you think' - they are not into that. They are an intelligent, engaged bunch but they are older and middle class people who just want to receive and luxuriate in it.

As well as reporting on society events, the county title is increasingly seeing itself as host. Staging Come Dine With Me events and networking dinners are further evidence of the county magazine's buoyancy as community lead.

Letters to the Editor has long been a touch point between audience and print products but this content has been omitted in Lancashire Magazine and the Live series. Where it does remain, an engagement level of four or five letters a month (for a circulation of 25,000) is expected. The fact that letters to the editor are of little editorial value, often reminiscences of times gone by or an appeal for publicity of events, adds to Skinner's argument that in-

teraction is preferred when it concerns real life and people. Readers are relatively engaged with competitions and a county title with a 20,000 circulation would expect 400 entries to win tickets to flower shows or the theatre. They also want to send in photographs for the kudos of being published. However readers are less likely to respond if a reader offer is for a beauty treatment or holiday as they doubt the offer's authenticity and suspect they will be sold out. According to Roger Borrell, editor of Lancashire Life, the reader wants to preserve anonymity in the first instance and will only reveal something of themselves if it complements the brand image.

The success of the county magazine is often attributed to its tactility and shelf life; the ability to return to the product. It has to feel good, be available to read with a cup of coffee or a glass of wine "in your armchair" and embody all that is luxury about its content. The print format is also noted as appropriate for older audiences who do not use online instinctively. While Lancashire's county magazines have decreased the paper quality of their print runs several times over the decades (Skinner, Borrell 2011), editors still extol the virtue of a glossy, sensual experience. As such, photography and imagery feature heavily. Free county magazines such as the Live series are dodging the recycling bin because of the quality of the printed product. As Borrell noted: "I don't think people in their fifties are going to be converted in a hurry and we have confidence in our product to weather out the changes."

## County titles capable of filling the local newspaper gap

In as much as county magazines work on connecting with people, there is evidence to suggest county titles are increasingly acting on turf previously owned by local newspapers. In terms of content, picture-led people stories, now the staple of county titles, were always the mainstay of a newspaper's page three or page five. There is evidence of shared territory in what's on pages, with different titles building guides into the unique selling point where appropriate (Northern Life claims to have the "north's biggest what's on guide" while Lancashire Magazine includes just two pages). The county magazine is also distinguishable by its picture quality and attention to detail. Editors argued that newspapers, no matter how hard they try with redesigns, colour and pull-outs, are a slowly dying format which fails to create a buzz. The longevity of the printed magazine and the social power of publicly reading it create an accountability that drives standards and quality up.

The amount of news content found in county titles depends on editorial decision-making and community need. Both the editors of free and paid-for titles expressed an interest in including news stories as representative of serving the community. RW Media's Live Preston, for example, covers education and some news, "which is exactly what the newspapers used to do", said editor Peter Holland. He added: "We are becoming more and more engaged with news because it needs to happen - no one else is doing it. There is a need, the goal posts have moved. We never set out to be so involved in the community but this role is coming to us as the newspapers aren't doing it." Lancashire Life has run successful campaigns (for example against pylons across an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) and covers public meetings "when local newspapers haven't wanted to know" said its editor Roger Borrell. The title was also exploring the possibility of including hyperlocal content in print and online for affluent parishes and villages currently neglected



in coverage by local newspapers.

However the agenda setting in county titles, as already stated, is a far cry from a news agenda followed by most town or regional news titles, where immediacy counts. While court, breaking news and town hall matters make newspaper pages, they are largely left out of the county title. Richard Eccles, editor of *Cumbria Life*, noted: “County mags are not all good news theory. It is not so much why there is so much bad news in newspapers as why there is so much boring news in newspapers.” In the case of paid-for titles, editors emphasise investment in journalistic quality as a mainstay for product value while free title editors focus on the balance between advertising and editorial.

## Monetizing the printed format

The careful construct of positive content that heralds all that is great about county life not only appeals to readers – but ultimately to advertisers. Local companies, businesses and professionals want to be in the brand community. They want their businesses to be seen alongside positive feel-good content and in a product with longevity. Whether from the content, visibility in the community or distribution model, these titles are increasingly creating a community mentality: readers and advertisers want to be in the magazine and want to receive it. AB households are hard to get at but the county magazine offers the highest penetration (Walmsley 2011).

Unlike newspapers, county magazines do not claim to operate a Chinese Wall between editorial and advertising. They have become more aggressive in their commercial activities over the past decades, according to editors. This may be another example of how this print genre is more closely in tune with what readers actually think and feel. “If it’s about the local market, that ad becomes content to you,” said Matt Fanelli, executive director of digital media at Time Inc’s Media Networks Inc (emedia vitals 2011). The power of magazines’ seduction and engagement has long been demonstrated by advertorial, where the magazine journalist writes a promotional piece for a brand under a strapline clarifying this distinction for the reader. The print format allows for a blurring of boundaries between editorial and advertising as these features become increasingly sophisticated.

In the Live series, the traditional county-wide distribution has been broken down into quadrants in order to create closer links between advertisers and readers. In this new hypercounty model, advertisers are only included in the magazine if they live within a 30-minute drive of a reader. Equally, the free magazines are distributed in a demographic model deliberately to exclude CDE households and target AB readers. The strategy in print operates a similar business model to daily deal sites which offer time and place sensitive deals. The accountability is achieved by the real leads generated: “the measurability of impact in the magazine is that a restaurant is full”, said Live managing director Tedd Walmsley, who asserted:

We are transparent that this is advertising. We are not cheating anyone. We are out-punching our weight because we are connecting a hyperlocal product of advertisers and readers. This is distribution at the heart of the business model which just does not translate online, the finest tuning of demographic married to advertisers. We have volunteers delivering it, marching the streets identifying where it needs to be placed. We know from looking through letter-boxes if they have the best quality carpets or the noise of the mag slapping a marble floor. We don’t want them in the wrong houses or to have any lying around, it devalues the brand.

Using digital opportunities to promote the magazine brand is proving important when distribution models in print are becoming more aggressive. Supermarkets and other outlets are increasingly seeking revenue by striking exclusivity deals with county publishers. Lancashire Life paid a premium for exclusive distribution in the upmarket North West supermarket chain Booths.

## County magazines: digital findings

This article has so far evidenced the qualitative responses from editors in how they construct reader loyalty around carefully selected content and deliberate distribution strategies. These strategies support a business model that aligns with aspirational advertising. While there are different modalities to creating a brand community, the county magazine connects audiences with their locality in a highly filtered and nuanced manner. It is a formula which has sustained county titles for decades and is also now providing start-up opportunities and the demand for placements and student employment.

Despite a growing trend for magazine companies to experiment with digital extensions, however, county titles have been largely slow to move online, seeing digital extensions as a bolt-on or byproduct. Resistance to publishing content online is born from a fear of cannibalizing the print product and its business model. Time and again, editors put priority on the tactility of the print product as a strong selling point of the county title. The physicality of a glossy, good-looking magazine is seen to go hand in hand with the user experience (see also Ytre-Arne 2011). The county magazine doesn't translate online because it is the look and feel that count; it is holding it in your hand and seeing it on the coffee table, according to editors.

The quantitative assessment showed that of the magazines studied, all had a website. All the paid print titles offered some editorial content online, the standard being to link the reader back to print editions either for more content or to "continue reading". Content featured in the print product had been consistently held back by a print-first strategy. There was limited evidence of exclusive online content but where this existed it took the form of behind-the-scenes features, social event photography and blogging platforms as inter-publication updates. All the paid print titles offered a limited what's on selection online. User interaction was evident in submissions for readers' short stories, photographs and competition entries. There was little or no evidence of reader interaction via comments on content.

Where content was published online, county titles prioritised the availability of photographic hosting on their own site, although none appeared to use photo-sharing sites such as Flickr. Lancashire Life uses its home website as a platform for users to submit entries for photographic competitions, and for consideration in the print product, complemented with an interactive geotagged graphic to view photographs. The Lancashire Magazine is moving to exploit the unlimited space of online by hosting social photographs for which there is not enough room in the print product. Matt Lee, digital director at The Lancashire Magazine, wanted the website to be user friendly. "If the website is welcoming and friendly it means more people are likely to buy the magazine. It needs to add value to the print – whatever that is." Richard Eccles stated the need to "dip our toes in social media" to amplify the vibe and use social media to promote the brand extensions, events and clubs, archive and pictures. The Live series would - if money was no object – be interested in drilling down into hyper-targeted content areas to offer different experiences to different

groups of readers in tandem with advertisers.

Lancashire Life had by far the richest digital offering with a range of archived editorials, photographic features, blogs from members of the community and guest authors. Web-only content is on offer in the form of blogs and reader promotions. Seasonal publications are offered to subscribers as a digi-zine and sent out via email. However digital versions of archived editions were not supported on tablets in 2011. Digital extras are promoted in the print product: Twitter is mentioned each month, blogs every few months and web exclusive offers are promoted in print. The varied digital touch points set out above exist so as not to deny people a platform as the publisher also looked into the potential for an app as a way of reaching younger audiences. The capacity of reader take-up of these digital offerings, by way of numbers of entries or comments, was also cited as a sound way of gauging reader feedback.

Online activity, however, was focused on websites acting as shop windows to the print product. The URLs adopt all or part of the county magazine title with several being hosted on parent company content management systems, such as Great British Life or CN Group. Being associated with a larger organization presents operational problems as content has to be shoe-horned into a pre-ordained template which has often been constructed with newspapers in mind.

For most of the county titles, the website is primarily aimed at getting a name in cyberspace. This is proving increasingly important for referrals and a way for readers to find contact phone numbers. All the sites featured staff details and Contact Us headings in a prominent position with editors accepting there was “some value” in being easily found on search engines. Data capture was used by Lancashire Life and the Live series by way of asking readers to subscribe or register to the site or specific competitions. In the case of Live Magazines, the website has been deliberately stripped to little more than a Meet the Team page. All the paid titles offered online payment facilities for subscriptions except The Lancashire Magazine. The biggest challenge for Lancashire Life was the difficulty in keeping the site refreshed. Ventures into digital extensions were also acknowledged to be costly, without the confidence that the market exists.

There was a general feeling among editors of fear of losing readers to the web if all the content is available for free. In both paid-for and free county models, there is evidence of content being actively restricted to protect the print business model. In terms of brand-building on social networking sites, all had Facebook groups except the CN Group publications, with activity representing one per cent of total print circulation (Lancashire Life had the largest group with 550 friends while the Live series had the smallest at 45). On social networking site Twitter, Lancashire Life and Carlisle Living both use hashtags and conversation with readers including retweets, shout outs and direct messaging. However Live magazines and Lancashire magazine had broken or sporadic automated feeds, while Northern Life and Cumbria Life had no Twitter account. Where content is already available from social events on networking sites, this is seen as a threat. Richard Eccles asserted:

We need to protect the content. Facebook and the like have the immediacy and transience of the evening papers. That is exactly what we are trying to avoid, so being on those platforms is not necessarily a good thing. Unless you can preserve the quality online it is better off not being there.

The resistance to online innovation is also founded in a desire to protect the carefully edited and constructed balance that the print product can deliver. The construct of the brand community, as discussed earlier, is difficult to emulate online where no one person controls the medium. Where editorial filters can function in a mutually advantageous way

in print, that complements both the hero 'reader' and the hero 'area', releasing content onto a platform driven by the mass is currently proving to be a turn off. Editor Richard Eccles stated:

There is a nervousness internally of putting ourselves out there to be commented on and discussed in terms of adverse comments. We cannot afford to have people who are in the magazine being criticized. We would have no control over the network and we don't want to give the vocal minority a platform. Our brand is built on traditional editorial integrity so it worries me to build that forum. Even if we make it too easy for people to invite us to attend events we would often be sadly saying no to them because the event might not fit the brand and that would be even more damaging.

While editors cited resourcing as a barrier to developing digital offerings, all acknowledged the potential for using analytics and databases more fully for digital marketing tools and as a way of developing local discount vouchers to further mutually advantage advertisers and readers. Although, as an additional barrier, editors believed that asking for personal data in the county magazine sector would be greeted with scepticism by their readers, who are typically older and more ill at ease on digital platforms and wary of providing personal information.

There is a general resistance to digital extensions of county titles among editors and directors ranging from hostility to trepidation. Editors talk of a "suspicion" and "nervousness". Anthony Skinner, editor of The Lancashire Magazine, asserted: "I am trying to ignore it. If people go on it, they are probably there by mistake. It is a bolt-on. I know buggger-all about digital offshoots. I have never been a gardener."

Lancashire Life editor Roger Borrell believed that the rush from print to online is driven by a herd mentality: "Most publishers do these things because they feel they have to and are not quite sure why." Of the management teams interviewed, all felt they did not understand why they were "doing digital" and any involvement with the online site was done wearily as an add-on, once other duties – perceived to be more pressing and of more value in terms of generating sales or advertising – were done.

This reluctance comes from commercial uncertainty. For advertisers, being in the magazine in its printed form is central to their objective of being associated with a glossy, luxurious product which is geographically targeted and filtered. This was further evidenced by experiments with video advertising packages at Lancashire Magazine which proved futile with advertisers. As Richard Eccles said:

It is print pounds and online pennies. There is no way you can get half a million pounds from digital entities. Someone from newspapers can't understand why we don't want this stuff. It's that we don't want to and we don't need to - it is not what we are about, and they think we're mad.

Tedd Walmsley added:

We have created a 'you have to be in it' mentality for advertisers, the club is so desirable that it leaves advertisers feeling 'what does it say about me if I am not in it?' No, you can't replicate print online and we don't want to, you can't monetize it.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this article has been to show how county magazines are bucking the trend of online brand extensions by actively prioritising print products over digital initiatives. It spotlights the unique selling point of printed county magazines as luxury, desirable items which are supported by a dual product business model. Editorial and advertising are being increasingly knitted together as part of a brand community, championing all that is great

about a local area: commerce, heritage, activities and, most importantly, real people. It is worth noting that the production of these magazines and the willingness of the readers to buy into an idealized version of a popular county is a mutual partnership that has allowed older titles to survive for decades and new titles to be launched and survive. Editorial content is carefully chosen and crafted with high-quality photography, and this sits seamlessly alongside advertising. It is a successful, profitable marriage. These brand communities are formed through quality content capable of championing people and face-to-face networks.

Online innovation is limited because publishers and editors can see little financial benefit. Many of the personnel have worked in newspapers where they have seen huge resources devoted to online publishing with little financial return and the risk of cannibalising print readership. Where content is digitised, its main purpose is as a shop window or driver back to the print product, promoting either editorial content or simply listing the team producing the magazine. This offers an important case study for students into the business of media. Interaction is limited and in some cases actively avoided which acts as a subtle differential for students in their understanding of the complexities of online publishing. Where developments are proposed, these are to focus on data capture, using online as a way of extending brand interaction or offering business innovation. Future study of the county magazine sector longitudinally is recommended particularly in relation to evidencing sustainable innovation. The unique selling point of the county magazine –with its long history and aspirational content - for both readers and advertisers remains rooted in a desire to be in a brand community that luxuriates in the tactility of a prestigious glossy product.

Our thanks are due to Dr Andrew Hobbs, research associate at the School of Journalism and Digital Communication, University of Central Lancashire, and to the guest editors who gave up their time to be interviewed for this article:

Banks, Lee Loop Publishing at Northern Life Interview July 2011

Borrell, Roger Editor Lancashire Life Interview May 2011

Eccles, Richard Editor Cumbria Life and Carlisle Living Interview April 2011

Lee, Matt Digital Director Lancashire Magazine Interview April 2011

Skinner, Anthony Editor Lancashire Magazine Interview April 2011

Walmsley, Tedd Managing Director RW Media Interview May 2011

Holland, Peter Editor Live Preston Interview Clare Cook April 2011

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## Appendix

CN Group: Cumbria Life enjoyed a 20% rise in circulation before moving from bimonthly to monthly in 2008 with a retention of 90% subscription figures, so doubling its revenue. The audited circulation is 13, 206 with a readership of 60,000 who are aged 35+ affluent and 'discerning'. The advertising rate for a DPS is £2,600 with 65:35 editorial to ad ratio. Average pagination is 164 with 40% sold on subscription at £2; the cover price is £3.40.

CN Group: Carlisle Living's cover price was increased from £2 to £3 between 2010 and 2011 without loss of circulation. It is produced monthly with a circulation of 6,000 and a readership of 26,000 aged 25-45 average and above average incomes young professionals and families. Pagination is 148 with a DPS at £1850 and an ed to ad ratio of 75:25. It is offered at £2 on subscription and £3 at the stand.

Archant: Lancashire Life has an audited circulation of 25,600 and a DPS rate of £3995 with 50:50 ad to editorial ratio. Its pagination regularly reaches 284 pages at a cover price of £3.25. It is produced monthly and is offered on subscription at 12 for £18.

The Lancashire Magazine is produced monthly with an audited circulation of 21,460 and a readership of 150,000. The ed to ad ratio is 55:45 with a pagination of 212-220. Subscriptions are on offer at 12 for £10 and the cover price is £1.95.

Loop publishing: Northern Life has a circulation of 25,000 and a readership of 100,000 published bimonthly with a pagination of 178. A DPS is listed at £2200 with subscription at £35 for two years or £19.99 for one year; cover price is £1.95

RW Media: Live Ribble Valley is a free 192-page magazine blurring the boundary between advertising and editorial with 30:70 ed to ad ratio at a rate of £895 for a DPS. It has a print run of 20,000 (for one quarter of the 'Lancashire' county) with a readership of 60,000.

RW Media: Live Preston has 128 pages and a print run of 20,000 with readership of 60,000 (again for one quarter of the 'Lancashire' county). The ed to ad ratio is 30:70