

The Art and Science of Magazine Cover Research

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Introduction

Media gadfly Malcolm Muggeridge once called the *Time* cover spot “post-Christendom’s most notable stained-glass window.”[1] Although he was being sarcastic, getting on the cover of *Time* or any high-circulation national magazine is one of the foremost goals of artists, entertainers, rock groups, and celebrities. For example, Dr. Hook and the Medicine Show sang about making the cover of the premier music magazine in their 1973 Top 40 hit, “Cover of the *Rolling Stone*”:

Rolling Stone – Gonna see my picture on the cover,

Rolling Stone – Gonna buy five copies for my mother,

Rolling Stone – Gonna see my smiling face on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. [2]

In the 60th anniversary issue of *Time*, editor-in-chief Henry Grunwald pointed out that rocker Billy Joel asked:

All your life

Is *Time* magazine.

I read it, too.

What does it mean? [3]

What it means is that magazine publishers, editors, and circulation directors know the importance of the cover image as both a newsstand impulse buy and as a brand. David Pecker, president and CEO of American Media, Inc. (publisher of the *National Enquirer* and *Star*), points out 80 percent of consumer magazines’ newsstand sales are determined by what is shown on the cover, a fact that can mean the difference between a magazine’s success or failure over time. [4] The cover image and design reinforce the brand, an important identification factor because the average reader spends only three to five seconds scanning a magazine cover before deciding whether to buy that issue. [5]

Consequently, publishers are deadly serious about what or who to put on the cover, even to the point of turning to their readers for cover choices. In September 2000, *Sports Illustrated* called 300 of its subscribers to ask them which story – “the inside scoop on Bobby Knight’s firing; Venus Williams’ U.S. Open victory; Kurt Warner’s leading the St. Louis Rams to nail-biting wins to open the season; or mighty Nebraska barely beating Notre Dame in overtime – deserved the prime cover real estate for the current issue.” [6]

To insure that the right cover is reaching the right buyer, *TV Guide* has published as many as 24 versions of the same issue. [7] Magazines as varied as *Jane* and *Fortune* also have published multiple options of the same cover topic, urging readers to buy all of them as a special set.

Anniversary issues often feature miniatures of previous covers. Advertisers like such special issues because they have longer shelf lives on the newsstands than the regular weekly or monthly magazine. Readers like them, too, saving the anniversary issue and referring to them weeks, months, and even years after their purchase. Magazine researchers find special collector’s editions that highlight covers to be valuable resources that save time and money. The following magazines have published either special collector’s editions or anniversary issues that included all or almost all of their covers (as miniatures): *Town & Country* (150th anniversary, October 1996); *Popular Mechanics* (100th anniversary, March 2002); *Outdoor Life* (100th anniversary, Summer 1998); *National Geographic* (100th anniversary, September 1988); *Time* (75th anniversary, March 9, 1998 and 60th anniversary, October 5, 1983); *Life* (60th anniversary, October 1996); *Ebony* (45th anniversary, November 1990 and 40th anniversary, November 1985); *Sports Illustrated* (35th anniversary, March 28, 1990); and *People* (25th anniversary, March 15, 1999 and 20th anniversary, Spring 1994). Other magazines have periodically featured all their covers to date or a representative sampling of their best covers: *Texas Monthly* (all 200 covers, September 1989); *TV Guide* (50 greatest covers, June 15-21, 2002); *Life* (2,000 covers, May 1988); and *The New Yorker* (variations of the Eustace Tilley covers and others that established the magazine’s look and spirit, February 21 & 28, 2000).

Books that feature pages upon pages of covers tend to be expanded versions of the special collector’s issues, with an introductory essay and little to no discussion of the individual covers. Carolyn Kitch’s *The Girl on the Magazine Cover*, however, focuses on the cover as a research entity, offering insight into the portrayal of women from 1895-1930 in *Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, and other magazines. See “Books Focusing on Magazine Covers” for an annotated bibliography of some key titles.

Industry Research About Magazine Covers

Magazine professionals have a lot of information available to them from trade journals and industry reports. Until recently, *Advertising Age*’s “Cover Story” offered a “monthly ranking of celebrities’ popularity as reflected by their appearances on the covers of more than 30 of the nation’s leading publications.” [8] *Folio*:’s ongoing critique of

magazine redesigns, a staple since 1998 that is now called “Face Lift,” includes the cover as a critical discussion point. Other professional publications, such as *Columbia Journalism Review*, *American Journalism Review*, *The Quill*, *Editor & Publisher*, *Media Week*, and *Adweek*, periodically discuss cover trends or changes to magazines’ faces. Most of the trade articles about magazine covers stress the marketing aspect, offering tips on how to create a cover that sells out on the newsstands. In recent years, this emphasis has come to include advice on how to “brand” the cover as a way of creating consumer loyalty and increasing opportunities for product or franchise extensions.

Even the consumer media may pick up on cover changes, particularly when a well-known magazine is redesigned or repositioned. Cover and editorial design changes to *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *New Republic*, and *Scientific American* resulted in stories in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and other media.

Industry groups such as the Magazine Publishers of America (MPA), American Business Media (ABM), American Society of Magazine Editors (ASME), Veronis, Suhler & Associates, Mediemark Research Inc. (MRI), Simmons Market Research Bureau, and Publishers Information Bureau (PIB) are just a few of the research resources available to editors and publishers. Plus, the research department staffs of such magazine publishing giants as Meredith, McGraw-Hill, Time Inc., Condé Nast, Hearst, Gruner & Jahr, and Hachette Filipacchi spend hours trying to decipher the links between individual covers, newsstand sales, circulation figures, and media buzz. Unfortunately, much of this research is proprietary and not available to magazine scholars.

Obviously, magazine editors, publishers, readers, and their cover subjects (especially the celebrities) take covers seriously. Yet a review of key academic journals and convention papers reveals a paucity of research about magazine covers.

Academic Research About Magazine Covers: Refereed Journals

When I first started studying magazine covers in the early 1980s, I was surprised to find that researchers had not turned their attention to magazine covers and the people and events they represented. My review of *Journalism Quarterly* from 1924 through 1985 yielded no articles that directly addressed magazine covers. My co-author (William G. Christ) and I found “articles that investigated news photos in magazines, specific content or styles in news magazines, how magazine stories were put together, and newspaper front pages, but none that directly addressed magazine covers.” [9] Yet as we researched the “Man of the Year” covers of *Time*, we were struck by the implications of the editorial decisions that had been made. As *Time*’s editors explained from the start, the “Man of the Year” selection identified the individual who had “dominated the news of that year and left an indelible mark – for good or for ill – on history.” [10] That meant, we wrote, “Analyzing the covers is useful for at least two reasons. First, the covers provide benchmarks to history. Second, the covers give a sense, generically, of who wields power and influence.” [11] We expected to see more studies that looked at such benchmarks and how they affected cultural and social viewpoints.

We didn't find follow-up or new research on covers, so in 1988, we decided to look at how many women had been depicted on the cover of *Time* since its inception in 1923. Our review of the literature found only one article focusing on magazine covers: "TV Guide: Images of the Status Quo, 1970-1979" by Jean E. Dye and Mark D. Harmon in the Summer-Autumn 1987 issue of *Journalism Quarterly*. However, "this study sought to evaluate how well *TV Guide* reflected the development of its host medium during a critical period in the history of television, the decade of the 1970s" and didn't apply to our research questions. [12] Consequently, we based our analysis of women on the covers on the categories developed in our earlier study. The "Women Through *Time*" research revealed that women appeared on only 482 covers out of 3,386 – or about 14 percent of the covers. We noted that women tended to be on the cover because they were artists or entertainers (128 individuals, or 37 percent of the time); spouses or some other family relationship to a male featured on the cover (75 individuals, or 22 percent); or socialite/royalty (28 women, or 8 percent). Women were not shown in significant numbers as world or national political leaders (22 individuals, or 6 percent), business executives (three women, or .9 percent), or scientists/physicians (only one woman, or .3 percent). [13] We thought this was significant information and expected to see more scholars turning to magazine covers as a research category. We expected to see other cover research that assumed social responsibility on the part of magazines and that attempted to determine whether covers accurately reflected gender, ethnic, and occupational trends. Again, we were disappointed.

By 1995, we were looking at magazines as cultural artifacts in relation to how international women were represented on news magazine covers. [14] We scoured *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *American Periodicals*, *Journal of Communication*, *Journalism History*, *Mass Comm Review*, *Journal of Popular Culture*, and *American Journalism* for research about covers. We found none. There were some content analyses that briefly mentioned magazine covers as part of an overall study of a particular topic (presidential campaigns) or issue (cancer), but the research primarily focused on magazines' inside editorial pages. Depending on the topic, the inside editorial pages of *Shape*, *Ebony*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Ms.*, and *Vogue* have been studied, but not their covers. *Time* and *Newsweek* are the magazines that stand out as research vehicles, primarily because it's easy to find a full run of them at libraries. Women's, young men's, health and fitness, shelter, and fashion publications are less likely to be available in complete bound copies. Bound copies offer the correct cover size and color, which are lacking if microfilm or microfiche are used.

Unfortunately, there isn't a lot of magazine research published in the journals of our field. Peter Gerlach revealed the scarcity of magazine research published in *Journalism Quarterly* from 1964 through 1983, finding only 6 percent of the articles dealt with magazines. [15] When Mark Popovich studied magazine research that had been published in *Journalism Quarterly* from 1983 through 1993, he noted that the percentage of published magazine research grew slightly, to 8 percent. [16] Popovich also pointed out that a similar study of *Communication Abstracts* found less than 1 percent of the scholarly articles focused

on magazines. David Sumner's informal study of *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* and *Journalism History* from 1995-1999 revealed less than 5 percent of the articles in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* related to magazines; *Journalism History* published only 6 percent of its content on magazine topics. [17]

Turning to academic journals in such disciplines as art, sociology, and gender studies, only a handful of articles focus on magazine cover research. In the April 1999 issue of *Sex Roles*, researchers examined the covers of 21 men's and women's magazines, looking at the images and the cover lines for conflicting messages about weight loss, diets, and appearance. [18] The entire issue of the Spring 1993 *Art Journal* was devoted to political journals published from 1910-1940, and included discussion of the covers of leftist and rightist magazines from Spain, Germany, France, Austria, Russia, and Mexico. [19] The August 1984 issue of *American Sociological Review* featured a study linking magazine covers and television, with the author arguing that television increased the use of symbols rather than identification labels on magazine covers. [20] These studies didn't take industry concerns about how well a cover sells on the newsstand into consideration, nor were other magazine journalism factors addressed.

Finding the right keyword(s) – whether doing a physical or a computer search – is critical in discovering past research. Looking through the table of contents of bound volumes may not yield any magazine cover “hits,” because many titles fail to use the word “covers” or even “magazine”; the one-paragraph summary may not yield clues either. Recognition of magazine titles is helpful when skimming bound volumes.

The problem is that there's no systematic agreement on how to classify research. For example, the Cumulative Index for Volumes 61-70 (1984-1993) of *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* does not list every magazine article under “magazine journalism,” which would be the logical main listing. Articles about magazines also are found (but not duplicated under “magazine journalism”) in such categories as “advertising,” “content analysis,” “history and biography,” “international communication,” “photojournalism,” “press performance,” “readership,” and “typography and design.” I was surprised that my “Women Through Time: Who Gets Covered?” research was not under “magazine journalism” and wondered why this article had been omitted from the index. I finally found it listed under “women and media.”

Academic Research About Magazine Covers: Refereed Conference Presentations

Refereed conference papers are another avenue for discovering the latest research in journalism and mass communication. Over the years, I've found some research about magazine covers at the annual convention of the Association of Education for Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), purchasing them in the “paper room” and toting them back home. Unfortunately, some papers listed in the program aren't placed in the room for sale, or sell out early. Finding them later in AEJMC or ERIC archives is a serendipitous proposition at best. The most efficient way to discover the latest refereed research about

magazine covers is to attend annual conventions.

As an appendix at the end of this essay, I've listed the magazine cover research papers I've found at AEJMC conventions. Most, but not all, were presented in Magazine Division research sessions. So far, I haven't found these papers in published form, which is unfortunate.

Conclusion

David E. Sumner, whose study of all 2,128 *Life* covers appears in this issue, points out that few scholars are attracted to studying magazine covers. "I think the reason for the dearth of research is that designing magazine covers that work is an art and not a science. Because covers are primarily art and not text, they can't be studied by content analysis as easily as text for 'positive,' 'negative,' or 'neutral' directional content."

Sumner says he was amazed and amused by the different approach scholars and professional journalists take in studying magazine covers. "Editors and journalists assume that the cover is simply a way to sell the magazine. It never occurs to editors whether their covers are an accurate reflection of the demographics of society, of social trends, or whether they reflect any of their own political or ideological orientations. They just want to sell the magazine so they can keep their jobs and preferably get promoted to a better job. I see nothing wrong with that; I am an ardent capitalist since my father was a self-employed businessman," Sumner says. "Scholars from other disciplines assume that magazines are supposed to be a 'cultural artifact' and in some vague way accurately reflect or influence society. It never occurs to scholars that magazines have to make money to stay in business. They think that designing a cover so that it will sell the magazine is the result of some lowly, beastly motive."

Carolyn Kitch, who utilized an interdisciplinary approach when writing *The Girl on the Magazine Cover*, identifies three challenges inherent in researching magazine covers. A primary problem, Kitch says, is the cover's context: "I think it's important in studying imagery to 'see' not only within the image, but also 'around' it, in terms of its cultural, institutional, political, and historical context. But it is so hard to know how to do that fully enough in order to be able to make broader claims about the meaning of magazine covers in a particular time period. No matter what the circumstances, there are always so many factors to consider, and in doing the research, I have discovered that the more I learn about a magazine, an illustrator, a time period, a political issue, a cultural trend, etc., the more I realize I have yet to learn. It is hard to know when and where to draw the line in (or around) my primary and secondary research that provides context for analyzing a particular image or set of images."

A second problem involves finding out who is responsible for the cover. Kitch says, "Most scholars simply attribute the nature (and/or message) of an image to the magazine, or, worse, to 'the media.' But someone thought up the concept and either created it or

commissioned someone to create it. Sometimes you can find evidence of which case it was, but more often you don't know. For instance, with regard to the covers I studied for the book, I knew a lot more about Norman Rockwell's covers for the *Saturday Evening Post*, because books (based on primary source material) have been written about both the *Post*'s editor at the time (George Horace Lorimer) and Rockwell himself. So I knew that Rockwell would bring in a couple of sketches, Lorimer would pick one, and Rockwell would finish it. In other cases, an editor or art director would tell an illustrator what he wanted; in still other cases, illustrators would create images (not knowing in what context they would be used) and then try to sell them. These circumstances have bearing on whose 'fault' (or credit) it is that a certain image seems to have had a certain meaning at a certain time. But you don't have this information unless you have access to business correspondence or an autobiography or some other good primary source from the time."

A related challenge, Kitch adds, "is knowing that you are right in your assessment of the 'meaning' of an image, especially when it is so old. How do I know that what I understand from an image is what people saw and thought a hundred years ago? Again, primary source material (letters to the editor, circulation figures, etc.) can be of help here, but it's impossible to ask the audience themselves."

A third obstacle is actually "seeing" the work, according to Kitch. She observes, "It is hard to see what an illustration really looked like when it's on microfilm (as so many old magazines now are in university libraries), let alone have a sense of the overall impact (color, size, etc.) of a magazine cover. When I did get to see the art itself, though, that was the primary joy. Magazine illustration from the early 20th century is a body of beautiful work. Almost no one else in journalism history research had written about illustration (most of my 'literature' was in art history), and because I had worked for two magazines (*McCall's* and *Good Housekeeping*) that were both more than a century old, I had a real appreciation for what the images added to the articles and to the identities of the magazines. I also could better understand why people of that time period bought so many magazines and kept them in their homes as valued objects."

According to Patricia Prijatel, who recently spent a sabbatical year in Slovenia, the biggest challenge of studying international magazines is translating both cover images and cover lines within a cultural context. "In Slovenia," she says, "magazine covers dealing with September 11 used the same types of images as in America – the exploding World Trade Center towers and, occasionally, a photo of Osama bin Laden. The cover lines on the surface seem easy to translate – it's not too much of a stretch to conclude that "Apokalipsa V Zda" means "Apocalypse Now." But a photo of Osama bin Laden in a Slovenian magazine has a far different subtext and, therefore, impact, than in an American magazine. While the Slovenes were outraged at the attacks and sympathetic to America's terror, they also saw bin Laden as a creation of the American military and the attacks as a result of American's sporadic international military intervention. Likewise, the threat of a war has a far different meaning in the United States than it does in Eastern Europe, where the serene countryside is pockmarked with the scars of thousands of years of conflicts. These nuances are easy to miss,

but missing them leads to a misunderstanding of the meaning of the cover to the Slovene reader.”

Magazine covers not only offer information about what’s inside a particular issue, they also provide significant cultural cues about social, political, economic, and medical trends. As both historical artifacts and marketing tools, magazine covers deserve closer study.

Unfortunately, the topic has not attracted many scholars. This issue of the *Journal of Magazine and New Media Research* offers six articles devoted to magazine covers – a record number in a single volume. I am delighted to have had the opportunity to edit this special issue, which I believe will be a valuable resource for scholars and for students.

Appendix

Refereed Papers Presented at AEJMC Annual Conventions

I’ve attended every Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) convention since 1985, purchasing every paper I could find that focused on magazine covers. The following is not intended to be a complete listing of all convention research focusing on magazine covers.

Abels, David. “Is the Cover a Mirror? An Analysis of Changes in Economic News Content in *Time* and *Newsweek*.” Presented to AEJMC Magazine Division, Atlanta, GA, August 1994.

Daigle, Lisa M. “The Astounding Women of *Analog*: A Content Analysis of Cover Art, 1930-1995.” Presented to AEJMC Magazine Division, Baltimore, MD, August 1998.

Greenberg, Bradley S. and Larry Collette. “The Changing Faces in *TV Guide*: An Analysis of Television’s New Season Demography, 1966-1992.” Presented to AEJMC Magazine Division, Atlanta, GA, August 1994.

Kressin, Lindsey. “Racial Cover-up 1996-2000: Who Is the Face on Today’s Fashion Magazine?” Presented to AEJMC Magazine Division, Washington, D.C., August 2001.

Lambiase, Jacqueline and Tom Reichert. “Sex Noise Makes Macho Magazines Both Teasing and Tedious.” Presented to AEJMC Critical and Cultural Studies Division, Washington, D.C., August 2001.

Endnotes

[1] Roy Paul Nelson, *Publication Design*, 5th ed. (Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown Publishers, 1991), 173.

[2] Sammye Johnson and Patricia Prijatel, *Magazine Publishing* (Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Contemporary Press, 2000), 226.

- [3] Henry Grunwald, “*Time* at 60: A Letter from the Editor-in-Chief,” *Time* Special Anniversary Issue (October 15, 1983), 5.
- [4] Johnson and Prijatel, 240.
- [5] Mary W. Quigley, “What Sells, What Bombs: Magazine Cover Roulette,” *Washington Journalism Review* (July/August 1988), 18.
- [6] Becky Yerak, “Editors Turn to Readers for Cover Choices,” *USA Today* (September 15, 2000), 7B.
- [7] Ibid., 7B.
- [8] Jon Fine, “Cover Story,” *Advertising Age* (December 10, 2001), 18. With the January 2002 redesign of *Advertising Age*, “Cover Story” no longer appears on a regular basis.
- [9] William G. Christ and Sammye Johnson, “Images Through *Time*: Man of the Year Covers,” *Journalism Quarterly*, 62:4 (Winter 1985), 891.
- [10] Time’s *Man of the Year 1950-1927* (New York: Time Inc., 1951), 1.
- [11] Christ and Johnson, 892.
- [12] Jean E. Dye and Mark D. Harmon, “*TV Guide*: Images of the Status Quo, 1970-1979,” *Journalism Quarterly*, 64:2/3 (Summer-Autumn 1987), 626.
- [13] Sammye Johnson and William G. Christ, “Women Through *Time*: Who Gets Covered?” *Journalism Quarterly*, 65:4 (Winter 1988), 889-897.
- [14] Sammey Johnson and William G. Christ, “The Representation of Women: The News Magazine Cover as an International Cultural Artifact” in *Silent Voices*, Doug A. Newsom and Bob J. Carrell, eds., (Lanham, MD: University Press of America: 1995), 215-235.
- [15] Peter Gerlach, “Research about Magazines Appearing in *Journalism Quarterly*,” *Journalism Quarterly*, 64:1 (Spring 1987), 173-182.
- [16] Mark N. Popovich, “Research Review: Quantitative Magazine Studies, 1983-1993” in *The American Magazine: Research Perspectives and Prospects*, David Abrahamson, ed. (Ames, IA, Iowa State University Press, 1995), 24-36.
- [17] David E. Sumner, “Letter from Our Division Head: Revisiting an Old Question,”

Magazine Matter, 20:2 (Spring 2000), 1.

- [18] Amy R. Malkin, Kimberlie Wornian, and Joan C. Chrisler, "Women and Weight: Gendered Messages on Magazine Covers," *Sex Roles*, 40:7/8 (April 1999), 647-655.
- [19] "Political Journals and Art, 1910-1940," Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, guest ed., *Art Journal*, 52:1 (Spring 1993), 8-87.
- [20] Karen A. Cerulo, "Television, Magazine Covers, and the Shared Symbolic Environment: 1948-1970," *American Sociological Review*, 49:4 (August 1984), 566-570.