

Examining Social Media and Digital Practices among Southeastern Magazines

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Abstract

Recent advancements in digital media have had drastic effects on magazines across the country. This research paper addressed those results by examining the digital and social media practices of four city magazines based in the American Southeast to determine what practices are working across social media and digital platforms. Through a content analysis, this study found that city magazines need to use local content, multimedia content and advertising bundles to draw in more visitors or advertising revenues.

I. Introduction

City magazines began to appear in American homes in the nineteenth century, but they did not truly flourish until the 1960s and 1970s. In 1981, there were eighteen magazines total in Washington, D.C., Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. Today, there are twenty in North Carolina alone (Hayes). Like most print publications today, city magazines face a declining print product, a smaller editorial staff, and pressure for an increased digital presence. This transition has taken time, and the digital presence has slowly taken precedent and developed a steady audience. As a result of this shift, the bulk of a magazine's readership comes not from people subscribing to the magazine or picking it up from a newsstand, but from visits to the publication's website. It is no longer a battle of what article is placed or teased on the front page, but what gets shared on Twitter or Facebook at peak viewing times. Social media has become the new front page for media.

A number of factors will be studied to determine what is succeeding on the digital front for city magazines. The magazines' Twitter and Facebook accounts will be observed, which in theory, should be utilized daily. This paper will analyze the numbers of retweets, favorites, likes, comments, and shares these magazines received through these two social media platforms while considering the difference in the size of their subscribers and social media followers. This paper will examine Twitter and Facebook to determine what type of content is most popular for city magazines and whether adopting certain digital-specific content attracts a more diverse audience to the magazine's website.

Four city magazines will be assessed to determine which digital practices are working for these publications: *Atlanta*, *Charleston*, *Charlotte*, and *Washingtonian*.

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II. Literature Review

To be a city magazine, a publication must have three characteristics: a focus on the geographic area it comes from, a mix of service and feature writing, and a lasting quality. The last is particularly important, as a magazine's content must still seem fresh three weeks after it was originally printed (Jenkins). City magazines, unlike newspapers and news magazines, are more likely to use a personal tone and use regional vernacular, translating well to social media, which adopts a much more personal tone.

To accurately determine what is exceptional among news organizations' social media accounts, a researcher did interviews with social media editors at the *AP*, *BBC*, *The Huffington Post*, *Mashable*, *breakingnews.com*, and *The New York Times*. Findings included adding value by sounding human and conversational in use of social media tools, adherence to traditional reporting standards, drawing users into the reporting process, and tailoring the use of each social media account so it plays to the specific platform's strength. On Twitter, this can mean retweets or engaging in conversation with users, though it comes with risks. Meghan Peters, community manager for *Mashable*, said it is important to look at the content of someone's profile before engaging with them to verify if the person is reliable to interact with (Craig). These traits, combined with what constitutes a city magazine, provide *Atlanta*, *Charleston*, *Charlotte*, and *Washingtonian* some advantage.

Because city magazines have a specific geographic range they cover, it gives them a defined space to engage with on social media. On Twitter, 39 percent of occurrences – retweeting, favoriting and tweeting at another account – happen within a user's region similar to a mid-size metropolitan area. Hashtags, which are used before a relevant keyword so it is categorized and shows up easily when searched, are also based on geography. When 6,640 tweets were examined in 2012 and 2013, a study found that three of *Charlotte's* top four hashtags were “clt,” “DNC2012,” and “charlotte.” The same study found that some of *Atlanta's* top hashtags were “altdining,” “atlarts,” and “atlmodernism” (Sivek). Hashtags like these showed the mix of service and feature writing a magazine normally produces.

The final trait of a city magazine, lasting content, is where it can fall short on social media. Unlike a daily newspaper or a news website, magazines do not have the personnel needed to tease fresh content on Twitter and Facebook daily. A study of 10 major U.S. magazines, ranging from *TV Guide* to *Real Simple*, found that, on a weekly average, published 61 tweets. Of those, 48 linked back to their websites. The content was usually entertainment or feature related, which are topics with a longer shelf life (Boyle and Zuegner). Following links to website, the next highest percentages of activity were retweets.

Demographics

A review of the magazines' media kits shows who is picking up the magazine and who is visiting the website. In terms of subscription, *Washingtonian* leads with 124,890 subscribers with the median subscriber age at 42 years. That it has the largest number of subscribers among the four is not surprising since it is published in the largest metropolitan area of the four magazines. *Atlanta* has a subscription rate of 68,341 with a median age of 46, and 61 percent of its reader identifying as female (*Atlanta*). *Charleston* has 11,000 subscribers with the median age at 51, and a 9-to-11 male/female ratio (*Charleston*). *Charlotte* has 30,000 subscribers and the highest rate of female subscribers at 65 percent.

The publications offered different digital media kits. *Charlotte* and *Washingtonian* had separate media kits covering their website while *Charleston* and *Atlanta* had the same document to cover both their digital and print version. All four revealed the number of website views and unique visitors per month, but only *Charleston* and *Atlanta* gave a breakdown of demographics, like age and gender, of site visitors. *Washingtonian* led with two million monthly visitors to its website, followed by *Atlanta* with just under one million monthly visitors, *Charlotte* with 370,000, and *Charleston* with 140,000.

Washingtonian's online media kit did not divulge age or gender of visitors, but focuses on geography and income (*Washingtonian*). *Atlanta* had a much greater difference in its online and print demographics. Male viewership ratio increases 7 percentage point to 46 percent, and 47 percent of its viewers are aged 18-34 (*Atlanta*). As much as 57 percent of *Charleston's* visitors were under the age of 44, in comparison with its median age of 51 for print subscribers (*Charleston*). *Charlotte* revealed the number of followers and “likes” it receives on social media and the number of total page views in total across the magazine and its two lifestyle publications (*Charlotte*).

Interaction online

Since its inception in 2006, Twitter has grown into a tool for sharing content, collaboration and breaking news. From November 2010 to March 2011, Twitter has increased across six different age groups. The largest was a 10 percent increase among 25- to 34-year-olds. In this time period, Twitter saw a 6 percent increase among 35-to 44-year-olds. One of the largest changes on Twitter from 2013-2014 occurred among households with incomes of more than \$50,000 a year, which increased from 15 percent to 27 percent. Together, those that made more than \$50,000 a year and 35-to 44-year-olds made up a sizeable portion of the four magazines' audience (Duggan).

Twitter engaged with a much younger and more media savvy audience than Facebook. In fact, Facebook saw an increasingly older audience every year. From 2011 to 2014, three million teenage users left Facebook while the site saw an 80.4 percent growth of users aged 55 and above (Saul). In total, women outnumber men on the website by about 10 percent (Guimarães). The overall demographic of Facebook matched the audience of the four city magazines.

With 64 percent of U.S. adults using Facebook, it is not surprising the website is one of the most popular places to learn about breaking news, especially by those who do not follow the news cycle regularly. Of respondents who said they follow the news less often, 47 percent said Facebook is an important way to receive news, 9 percentage points higher than heavy news followers. Like *Atlanta's* much younger online audience, 34 percent of Facebook news consumers are people aged 18 to 29. People are also engaging with Facebook news pages: 64 percent of news consumers sometimes clicking on a news link and 60 percent sometimes liking or commenting on a story (Mitchell). On Twitter, the most popular time to tweet is between 8:01 a.m. and 4 p.m., with 58.5 percent of content posted then. It was also discovered that weekly magazines do not publish more frequently than their monthly counterparts, which will reuse archived material (Boyle and Zuegner). Though popular, Twitter still ranks second to Facebook in terms of popularity among magazine readers.

Based on an Association of Magazine Media poll, reported that 91 percent of magazine readers aged 18-34 use Facebook; 61 percent, YouTube; and 40 percent, Twitter. Respondents were found to engage in social media while reading a magazine article. Forty-two percent of readers on Facebook and 51 percent of readers on Twitter said they share what they are reading. This research separated respondents into "readers" and "avid readers." "Avid readers," who marked themselves as such on the survey, were considerably higher in terms of interaction with magazines and editors via social media ("Magazine Media Readers are Social").

"MOJO" and word of mouth

In 2015, 64 percent of American adults own a smartphone, a 35 percent increase since 2011 (Smith). The popularity of these devices has impacted city magazines. Mobile journalism by citizens, known as "MOJO," became a recent phenomenon because of social media and the availability of smartphones. Anyone can now record footage or snap a photo and become a contribution in the news cycle. With magazine reporting staffs shrinking by almost 50 percent since 1985, the need for more people on the ground has increased. Citizen journalists are used for reporting serious incidents, such as the recent rioting in Baltimore, Maryland, and Ferguson, Missouri, but city magazines are more likely to be used to share photos and reviews of restaurants, which relates to the type of content usually published (Waldman).

Word of mouth was found to be the most powerful tool for getting customers engaged with digital platforms. With shares and retweets available on Facebook and Twitter, it was easy for social media users to recommend a product to their friends and followers. With a click of a button thousands of people can see a story teased within a few seconds. The benefits of word of mouth included frequent visitors to a publication's site, with focus on topics to help target a geographic area by seeing who is talking about the magazine's content and where they are (Martin).

The relationship between the digital and print side of the magazine has not always yielded the best results for audience interaction. A study of 522 U.S. magazines found a "negative relationship between the demand for digital and print magazine content" (Martin). Content on websites that had some overlap with a printed edition of the magazine had a 3 to 4 percent reduction in circulation. Magazines that placed an entire edition online lost up to 9 percent of circulation. They have to walk a fine line between giving enough to keep readers interested in the physical product and losing print subscribers. When used effectively, social media can support the print product. It can extend the product, sell to advertisers, and interact with the audience

(Martin). When used unwisely, social media may prove disastrous for a magazine.

Bundling

Magazines, more than newspapers, are published in fairly specific genres. This provides advertisers with a concrete idea of the type of content to be expected and whether or not the product benefits from advertising in a city magazine. Historically, magazines have tried to maximize their profits by effectively balancing advertisements and editorial content. The idea behind this is if magazines “force” readers to see advertising, which was traditionally assumed to be a “bad” element to readers, then publishers have to lower the subscription rates for readers and/or see their subscribers’ base shrink. Depken and Wilson found this is not true of the 95 U.S. magazines they studied: Forty-five magazine (46% of 95) actually could increase both advertising and subscription prices, and nineteen magazines (21%) could increase subscription prices even though they lost some subscribers.

Atlanta, *Charleston*, *Charlotte*, and *Washingtonian* did not bundle content digitally. Advertisements seemed unrelated to the four magazines’ websites. As in the print product, advertisements appeared in specific locations on the webpage, but when and where they appeared seemed random. For example, an article on *Atlanta*’s website about a chef featured an advertisement about the culinary scene in Hilton Head, South Carolina, as if the two were a bundle. But once the page was refreshed, the advertisement changed to an advertisement focusing on Atlanta Healthcare.

BuzzFeed, an Internet news media company, packages content around advertisements. For a Virgin Mobile ad, BuzzFeed developed a list of reasons on Valentine’s Day to “break up with their carrier.” As a result of this packaging, Virgin saw a 95 percent spike in sales (Rice). With BuzzFeed-style websites becoming popular among younger consumers, magazines can look to digital-only news organizations to not only learn about bundling, but about practices as well.

Implementing digital journalism practices

BuzzFeed’s a relatively new player in journalism having started in 2006, but it has made a significant impact. It has captured the attention of investors as well as people under the age of 35. Fifty percent of its 200 million-plus yearly visitors are between the ages of 18 and 34. From 2006 to April 2013, venture capitalists invested \$46 million in the company. Other websites like Distractify and Upworthy soon followed, releasing similar content like lists, videos, and gif-heavy text, with the aim to go viral. These websites are popular among people younger than thirty-five. Should city magazines adopt a few of these methods for their digital operation, they could attract a younger audience (Rice).

One of the defining traits of online journalism was the listicle, or a list-based article, usually providing a snappy summary of news or a ranking of something like “The 30 Happiest Facts of All Time,” as seen on BuzzFeed. Ross Hawkes, a senior lecturer of journalism at the United Kingdom’s Birmingham City University, told *The Guardian* “a younger audience is far more comfortable with bullet-pointed information, they’re used to consuming 140-character information, short or visual Facebook updates and receiving a sample of what’s going on.” Another factor toward the popularity of listicles, according to *The Guardian*, is that they have always been around, with magazines, specifically, having used them (Lawlor).

City magazines should avoid using clickbait journalism, a recent movement within the industry, and a popular strategy of BuzzFeed, Distractify, Upworthy, and other publications. The main purpose of clickbait content is “to attract attention and encourage visitors to a particular web page” (Hamblin). It is a modern day yellow journalism, which often used exaggerations to attract the attention of readers, such as headlines like: “17 Facts You Won’t Believe Are True” and “A Curious Monkey Reaches For A Man’s Hand. What Happens Next Is Too Precious for Words,” which intentionally leaves out vital information for the reader (Hamblin). Websites like Distractify and Upworthy, which don’t have a tradition of hard news reporting, can get away with publishing clickbait. Alex Mizrahi, who runs @HuffPoSpoilers, a Twitter account parodying *The Huffington Post*’s use of clickbait, told *The Daily Beast* that clickbait sours when utilized by news organizations like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Associated Press*. “How can you be taken seriously when you leave out the ‘who, what, where, why, [and] how’ when it’s relevant to the news story,” he said. “It’s obvious you can’t fit the whole story, [but] you have to give context. You can’t fall back on the same formulas” (Shire).

III. Methods

The author conducted a content analysis to measure the level of interaction with readers that *Atlanta*, *Charleston*, *Charlotte* and *Washingtonian* had through their Facebook and Twitter accounts. The analysis was conducted over the week of April 10 to April 16, 2015. Each tweet was examined to see whether it had a multimedia element – photo, video, illustration, etc. – attached, the subject matter of the post, and how many favorites and retweets the post received. On Facebook, all posts had visual elements attached so the subject of the post was counted.

Tweets with images were routinely the most interacted with on Twitter. The most popular post of the day was put into one of six categories: entertainment and arts, food and drink, home and garden, sports, event and contest, and vacation. Events and contests were found to be the most interacted post on Twitter and Facebook.

In addition to social media, the websites of the four magazines were inspected to determine if the publications bundled content and if they implemented the use of listicles, quizzes and clickbait headlines.

IV. Results

In terms of Twitter and Facebook followers and posts, *Washingtonian* had the most, followed by *Atlanta*. Next, *Charleston* had more Facebook likes than *Charlotte*, and their rank was switched on Twitter followers.

From April 10 to April 16, *Atlanta* and *Charleston* utilized Facebook more than Twitter to share content, while *Washingtonian* and *Charlotte* were the opposite. *Charleston* used social media the least, with three Facebook posts and four tweets in a week, and no post for three entire days. In comparison, *Washingtonian*, which was active every day, posted on Facebook 36 times and tweeted 181 times.

Of the content shared on the four magazine's Twitter accounts, the most popular tweet of the day usually included an image or video. *Charleston*, which had the least successful Twitter presence of the magazines, never utilized images and never received more than one retweet and one favorite on a single post. *Atlanta* and *Charlotte* were slightly better in terms of adding visuals, with the former having five days and the latter four days, not including an image or video. *Washingtonian* utilized images the most, with six of its seven most popular tweets including a photo. In terms of video, only *Charlotte* and *Washingtonian* tweeted with a video attachment, with both having done so once during the week.

Across all four publications, unique local content was the most popular on Facebook and Twitter. From April 10 to April 16, the subject matter of the most popular posts included home and contests (7 times each), followed by entertainment and arts (5 times each), food/drink and sports (3 times each), and home/garden and vacation (one time each). *Washingtonian* posted the single most responded tweet. On April 15, a man flew a gyrocopter through protected airspace onto the lawn of the Capitol in order to protest campaign finance laws. In response to the event, *Washingtonian* published an article detailing the history of when people could perform such an act legally. It received eighty-one retweets and forty favorites.

Atlanta and *Washingtonian* routinely both shared news and recycled old content on Facebook and Twitter. This could be a simple solution for *Charlotte* and *Charleston* to engage with readers if they were suffering from a lack of information to share with followers. Another easy way to engage in sharing content is by retweeting. While *Atlanta*, *Charleston*, *Charlotte*, and *Washingtonian* are not likely to share people's statuses on Facebook, they are likely to retweet users who have shared content on Twitter. In total, *Washingtonian* retweeted the most, doing so fifty-five times. However, *Charlotte* had the worst ratio of retweets to original posts, retweeting twenty-two times compared to fourteen original tweets.

The four magazines do not implement a pay wall on their websites, so subscribers and non-subscribers can access the same digital content. But some content, such as selected stories, graphics, contests and coupons, are only available through print copies, which provides paying customers with additional material.

To offer a plethora of feature stories as city magazines, they were using "MOJO" for community events like festivals and celebrations. When the Cherry Blossom Festival occurred from March 20 – April 12 in Washington, D.C., the *Washingtonian* found a unique way to cover the event. Twitter, Instagram,

and Facebook on the website asked people to upload pictures of the cherry blossoms using the hashtag #WashMagPhoto. The magazine accumulated the photos and published them in an article online for people to see their submissions. This made individuals feel like they were contributing to the news cycle, which led them to view other content and share content via word of mouth.

Atlanta, *Charleston*, *Charlotte*, and *Washingtonian* have all posted listicles within the two-month observation period. All of them have annual lists ranking the best doctors, restaurants, and businesses in the area and have more localized content as well. *Washingtonian* published a bucket list for the Washington, D.C. area; *Charleston* named the city's 40 most influential visual artists; and *Atlanta* had "5 Stores for Unique Goods." Another popular trend among online-only news organization is developing quizzes for users to take. This can range from supplementing the news cycle with a quiz on "Star Wars" when a trailer for a new *Star Wars* film is released or something seemingly random like "How Many Of These Dog Breeds Do You Know?" Though quizzes are not as popular in city magazines as they are in publications like *Cosmopolitan*, only a smattering of quizzes have been produced by *Atlanta*, *Charlotte*, and *Washingtonian*. *Atlanta* published "How Southern Are You?" and "How Well Do You Know 90s Atlanta." *Washingtonian* quizzed readers on "How Washington Are You," and *Charlotte*, which is published in a banking city, wanted its readers to know about corporate superpower.

Atlanta, *Charleston*, *Charlotte*, and *Washingtonian* managed to refrain from using clickbait journalism and, as a result, they avoid a possible purge by Facebook. In August 2014, Facebook said it would begin cracking down on clickbait headlines. This change is coming after about eighty percent of people surveyed said they preferred seeing headlines on their News Feed that help them decide if they wanted read the full article before clicking through. Because the nature of clickbait can be subjective, Facebook uses two factors to determine if a post uses it: how much time people spend on the link and the ratio of how many people click on the link compared to the number of comments and shares (Chowdhry). Twitter has not announced a stance on the issue, but there are a number of parody accounts – @UpworthySpoilers, @SavedYouAClick, and @HuffPoSpoilers – to mock the use of clickbait.

V. Conclusion

The use of social media by *Atlanta*, *Charleston*, *Charlotte*, *Washingtonian* and other city magazines is still relatively new, as social media has only been prominent force for the last 10 years. This study supported that social media has been largely a positive factor for city magazines by giving them wider audience reach for both the physical and digital products. The study found that *Charleston* and *Charlotte* could improve the sharing of their own content, because both websites boast a wealth of stories. Research also showed that users did not often respond to self-promotion on social media platforms unless it directly involves where they work or spend much of their time.

The priority for these magazines, and their genre as a whole, seems to be to attract a younger audience. Mixing existing and new practices of storytelling and multimedia content could possibly accomplish this goal. Listicles, quizzing, and articles that have incorporated interactive images and gifs have proved to be popular among younger news consumers. Multimedia elements, which were routinely included in all four magazines' postings on Facebook, might also be implemented on Twitter regularly. The study found that of the magazines, all but the *Washingtonian* needed to share content more consistently and daily. *Atlanta*, while publishing more than *Charleston* and *Charlotte*, still did not tease content every day. People check their social media accounts daily, so there is an opportunity for content consumption on a 24 hour, seven day a week basis.

Finally, city magazines can follow successful strategies by tracking newly established organizations that younger readers are attracted to. The magazines did a mediocre job of attracting people under the age of 35 to their websites. They needed to avoid pitfalls like controversial clickbait journalism. By implementing these strategies, city magazines can achieve a soft landing into journalism's digital era. Magazines can maximize their use of social media by expanding beyond Twitter's 140-character limit, experimenting with visuals, and capitalizing on its potential as a platform for engaging with readers.

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