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Review of David Abrahamson and Marcia R.
Prior-Miller, eds, *The Routledge Handbook of
Magazine Research: The Future of the Magazine Form*
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Reviews

David Abrahamson and Marcia R. Prior-Miller, eds, *The Routledge Handbook of Magazine Research: The Future of the Magazine Form* (New York: Routledge, 2015). 650 pp. ISBN 978-1138854161.

In 1995, David Abrahamson, professor at the Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, published an important anthology entitled *The American Magazine: Research Perspectives and Prospects*. Since then, periodical studies have grown into a flourishing research field that brings together scholars from many different backgrounds. The wealth of recent publications in magazine scholarship fostered the need for an updated version of Abrahamson's book. The idea of a new handbook of magazine research sprang up during a 2011 conference of the Association of Education in Journalism and Mass Communication and was realised by a team of 38 scholars under the direction of David Abrahamson himself and Marcia R. Prior-Miller (professor emeritus at Iowa State University), author of the *Bibliography of Published Research on Magazine and Journal Periodicals*. The result is a 650-page handbook that offers a broad overview of contemporary magazine scholarship.

The Routledge Handbook of Magazine Research focuses mainly on American magazines and their engagement with popular culture. Magazines are an exceptional genre in that they have a close relationship with their readers, and thus play an important role in the formation and expression of cultural identities. The ambition of this handbook, besides providing a structured bibliographical resource, is to 'further broaden and deepen our understanding of the magazine form, as well as the sociocultural realities it both mirrors and influences' (p. 2).

Looking back on the last two decades, Abrahamson stresses the impact of the digital revolution on the magazine industry. He states that the development of the world wide web points toward increasing specialization and that magazine publishing companies are particularly apt at serving niche markets

through so-called narrow casting, both in print and online. His vision of the future of magazines in the digital age is therefore quite optimistic:

Despite the importance of the Web, it is clear that both as a self-contained, highly targeted information vehicle and as a core brand from which other products will be extended, the magazine in its contemporary printed form will continue to demonstrate its efficacy as a source of information and pleasure for its readers, its utility as a marketing vehicle for its advertisers and its viability as a business enterprise for its publishers well into the twenty-first century. (p. 2)

All aspects of magazine culture that Abrahamson refers to here are addressed extensively throughout the book. It has a high information density, but is nevertheless quite accessible thanks to its transparent structure. It is divided into six main sections that are logically organised. Each individual chapter follows the same basic format. The author generally starts with a literature review, providing an overview of the most important publications of the last twenty-five years. The method underlying the bibliographical research is always discussed explicitly. Through a discussion of recent scholarship in a particular subfield, the author identifies major theoretical and methodological developments. He or she generally concludes with a discussion and suggestions for future research. Every article ends with an extensive bibliography, which is then also integrated into the general bibliography that covers no less than seventy-eight pages.

Part I presents a wide range of theories and models for magazine research and will be of interest to any periodical

scholar. The first article, by Carolyn Kitch, provides an excellent starting point for a reflection on magazine theories and corresponding research methods. The author discusses different models for understanding magazines, stating that a shift has occurred since 2002, when David Abrahamson urged researchers to go ‘beyond the mirror metaphor’ and consider the ways in which mass media may catalyse cultural change. Magazines are now generally considered as both reflecting and shaping social realities. However, scholars may stress either their descriptive or prescriptive role, leading to different approaches. Kitch distinguishes three major views on the genre: magazines as a form of control, magazines as a form of community and magazines as a form of culture. She links each of these approaches to the relevant theoretical frameworks and gives insightful examples of the kind of research results they might generate. Other articles in this section are devoted to more specific approaches (e.g. magazine typology, magazines as historical study subjects, or source and citation analysis) or discuss a specific subgenre or theme.

The second section is centred on the study of the people and institutions involved in the magazine business, such as editors, advertisers, and managers. Parts III and IV discuss magazines as forms of textual and visual communication, in chapters covering a wide range of subjects including gender, religion, science, literary journalism, design, and illustration. Together they offer a wealth of perspectives on the genre, combining approaches from economics, art history, cultural analysis, sociology, and communication studies. Part V is quite original in that it focuses entirely on pedagogical and curricular perspectives. The first chapter investigates the place of magazines in journalism and mass communication education. The next ones discuss useful publications on teaching magazine writing, magazine editing or magazine research.

The last section is entitled ‘The future of the magazine form’ and takes up themes such as sustainability and digitization. In his concluding essay, Abrahamson investigates the impact of the digital revolution on the information ecosystem as a whole, and more specifically the ways magazines are using the internet as a companion to the print product. At the same time, some online publication platforms call themselves magazines, thus testifying to the particular appeal of the genre. Abrahamson states that, rather than being a simple platform or delivery method, magazines are an art form whose particular structure and material qualities contribute to create a strong bond with the reader. From an economic point of view, no viable business model has yet been developed for digital magazines. These factors explain why print magazines are still very much alive and will undoubtedly survive the digital revolution, especially if they manage to reinvent themselves and take advantage of these new technologies. Something similar might be said of magazine research, which will continue to explore these questions in years to come and has the potential to be a pioneer in the field of digital humanities.

The main interest of *The Routledge Handbook of Magazine Research* lies in the fact that it offers a very complete bibliography of recent publications in American magazine scholarship. This is especially welcome since it is a very broad and interdisciplinary field, making it virtually impossible for anyone to have a good overview of relevant scholarship. The focus on American magazines brings coherence to the volume, but it inevitably excludes important sections in periodical studies, such as the thriving subfields of research into Victorian periodicals or modernist magazines. Some of the seminal contributions to these areas are mentioned in passing, but the term ‘magazine’ is clearly meant to refer to a popular mass medium, rather than literary or artistic periodicals catering to a cultural elite. European periodical scholars might furthermore

regret the fact that the editors limit their view to research published in English, with a very strong focus on the USA. Despite those minor objections, I would like to conclude by saying that this handbook

will prove to be an invaluable resource for anyone involved in periodical studies.

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