

THE NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC
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People

The
**MAGAZINE
CENTURY**

American Magazines Since 1900

DAVID E. SUMNER

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Preface

A Focus on Innovators and Innovation

How do you write a history of magazines when at least 20,000 magazines are published in the U.S. according to the latest 2008 numbers?¹ I have asked myself that question over and over as I researched and wrote this book. Each magazine has its own history and dozens of well-known magazines have had entire books written about their histories. The problem gets more complicated because an estimated 100,000 American magazines have been published at one time or another in the last century. Experts estimate that more than 80 percent of all new magazine launches last less than three years. Many once-great magazines, such as *Life* or *Woman's Home Companion*, were successful for decades only to succumb to changing times. If I wrote a page on every magazine published at any time between 1900 and 2000, I could have a 100,000-page book. Therefore, I would like to outline the parameters of this book.

First, I have limited it to the best-known consumer magazines. The term “consumer magazines” refers to those that anyone can subscribe to or purchase at newsstands. Therefore, it will not include business-to-business or “trade” magazines or those published by organizations, professional associations, colleges and universities or special interest groups. Even when limiting the scope to consumer magazines, there are at least 9,000 magazines to write about.

Second, I chose to focus on innovative magazines, editors and publishers. Within each decade, I looked for publishers and editors who established successful magazines and did something different or better than their competitors. They discovered a new business model, a new niche, a new editorial formula, or other-

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wise found a way to publishing success in a competitive business environment. Generally that means the highest-circulation magazines, but not necessarily. Many small-circulation, but notable magazines are included within these pages.

Third, I wanted to write the history of magazines within the context of American history, not as isolated entities devoid of larger social and economic trends. Therefore, the book is organized chronologically by decades. Previous books about American magazine history were structured according to sectors and niches. Each structural approach has advantages and disadvantages. I chose to write about some magazines that illustrated or reflected the trends of each decade. I also wrote about “magazines that made the news” in all news media—whether for laudable reasons or because of scandals, lawsuits and controversies. This book contains the good news and the bad news.

Fourth, I chose magazines that reflected or illustrated larger trends taking place within American society. For example, the women’s movement brought the launch of magazines such as *Ms*, and the civil rights movement contributed to the success of *Black Enterprise* and *Essence*. The focus on sex and celebrity that began during the 1970s brought the success of *People*, *Us Weekly*, *National Enquirer* and *Entertainment Weekly* and many similar titles.

Fifth, I chose to focus on magazines that are still published and with which modern readers will be familiar. I will discuss a few once-great magazines that are no longer published, such as *Literary Digest* and *Life*. The extinct magazines that I chose to write about were historical because of their impact on society or they were in some way innovative in their time.

It seems most prefaces end with the glowing accolades to the author’s spouse who supported him or her through every trial while putting up with prolonged absences from family duties. I have already expressed those sentiments to my wonderful wife, Elise, so that I could refrain from boring the readers. I offer a special thanks to Ball State University, which provides duly-chosen faculty members with paid sabbaticals or “special assigned leave” as we call it. Without this leave during the fall semester of 2009, I could not have written this book. Special thanks also to the editors and staff at Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. in New York who made this author’s job easy. This international company based in Geneva, Switzerland, donates its profits to international children’s charities, which gave me an added incentive to give you—the readers—my very best work.

DAVID E. SUMNER

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Note

1. *The Magazine Handbook 2009–2010* (New York: Magazine Publishers of America, 2009), www.magazine.org/advertising/handbook/Magazine_Handbook.aspx.