

Digitally Compressing the Magazine Archive What Might be Won and Lost When Forgoing a Visit to the Stacks

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On October 18th, 2012, *Newsweek* announced the end of its eighty-year weekly print run in order to publish all of its articles digitally, shocking avid readers.¹ At a moment of fierce advertising revenue competition and high saturation rates of handheld electronic devices, the state of the printed magazine is often popularly lamented to be in a crisis.² Although the printed magazine most likely will not disappear anytime soon given that magazines still profit the most from targeted advertising revenue and impulse purchases at newsstands and grocery checkouts, where and how magazines will be sold and read in the future is an unanswered and well-debated question.³ However, rather than ruminating on the future of the magazine and mourning the “death” of an American magazine icon like *Newsweek*, I focus this essay on a related topic: the digitization of old magazines into electronic archives and how to navigate the ways these archives can advantageously and problematically compress time and space for us as media researchers.

In my work on the history of popular post-World War II magazines, including *Life* and *Vogue* magazines, completely searchable access on Google Books (as is the case for *Life*) or subscription databases like ProQuest (*Vogue*) is a boon

for productivity.⁴ I can search within the text of covers, articles, images, and advertisements after entering keywords, date ranges, or other advanced criteria in various search fields.⁵ Results appear in a matter of seconds, allowing me to immediately sift relevant materials for analysis. Moreover, items of interest may be tagged for later retrieval and study.

This process of accessing electronic magazine archives differs drastically from what researchers have had to do when digital copies are not available. One most likely would start with *Reader's Guide*, which has indexed major American periodical articles by subject matter since 1890.⁶ Today, researchers can access *Reader's Guide's* regular updates to its online index or they can consult its long-standing printed index found in bound volumes.⁷ After consulting *Reader's Guide* to identify specific issues with relevant items, one would then need to retrieve and consult the magazines in question in a library's stacks, either in their original form (usually in bound volumes, divided by month or year; or in loose piles) or on microfilm or microfiche.⁸ If no copy is available at one's library, one would need to order a specific item through interlibrary loan or visit a collection elsewhere. Unfortunately, just relying on *Reader's Guide* does not guarantee that what is retrieved will be relevant to one's work and research questions, as subject listings can be vague or not all possible subject terms are applied to an article, which means one could miss important items.⁹ Moreover, *Reader's Guide* historically has not indexed photographs, cover content, and advertisements.

For digital magazine archives, there are numerous advantages over the *Reader's Guide* approach. Researchers can target keyword searches within magazine archives immediately, which bypass the need to start with *Reader's Guide*. Additionally, moving from one edition of a magazine to the next is relatively simple and seamless, even with the steep learning of mastering the search functionalities of a specific archive database.¹⁰ One can often move quickly from one month to another, or even from one decade to the next, by viewing and narrowing the search results. Research time is reduced, and access to historical documents folds space since the need to visit an archive can be eliminated.

Yet with all the speed by which researchers can proceed through digital archives, are we researchers losing out on the vital experience and inferences that may be possible with examining an original print magazine? What is lost,

if anything, when we do not have the possibility to flip through a magazine as readers had done in the past? What happens to serendipitous findings and connections that come from looking beyond the narrow search results that are retrieved? To sort through these questions, Walter Benjamin's famous 1936 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," is helpful to consider since it reflects on technology's place in the reproduction of produced works and the transfer and storage of knowledge.

For Benjamin, original works of art have a power all their own. They contain an almost indescribable essence, or "aura," that was built into the physical creation of the work of art by its author(s). Or, as Stephen G. Nichols defines, aura is "a mystique emanating—in the experience of a viewer—from a natural or artistic object, a mystique that translated into the viewer's sense of spatial or temporal distance interposing itself between the viewer and the object."¹¹ Perfections and imperfections that were brushed into a painting or built into the construction of a work are viewable in an original for all to see and admire. Additionally, as time passes, one can see marks of a work's history along with its age. According to Benjamin, having a mechanically reproduced version of an original creates a barrier between the viewer, the original, and its creator. A work's fine details are lost through the mechanistic stamp of the printing press, and the power that comes with being before an original diminishes or is non-existent. In other words, reproductive machines sap the physical and metaphysical presence that exudes from an original assemblage. Efficiency and profit motives from mass production take over, leaving a work of art lifeless, devoid of meaning, and ripped from its unique history and context. As Benjamin writes,

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership. The traces of the first can be revealed only by chemical or physical analyses which it is impossible to perform on a reproduction; changes of ownership are subject to a tradition which must be traced from the situation of the original.¹²

Although Benjamin focuses his essay on the reproduction of fine works of art, these ideas transfer productively to the process by which magazines and other print media are squeezed into digital data by high-speed, full-color scanners and made available through online search engines and databases.

It might seem odd to worry about the digital reproduction of a medium like magazines that is comprised of mechanically manipulated reproductions. However, magazines are unique artifacts. Each magazine is constructed and organized carefully by its team of editors, writers, image artists and photographers, so while a magazine can be seen as an original collage reproduced for maximum distribution, only a set number of magazines is made in a print run. Moreover, editors work to craft a certain experience of the world within their portable, print magazines, which involves everything from the magazine's size to the texture of the paper to the gradient and feel of the ink. Magazines are not just repositories of data or a mere record of the history of a moment in time, they are also experiences for readers, past and present, to build their sense of what is important in the world around them.

Consequently, Benjamin's discussion of reproduction presses us to question the types of conclusions that we media scholars might be able to draw from looking at digitally archived magazines. What happens to the lived experience and aura of reading a printed magazine when one only resorts to an item plucked out individually from the digital archive? What is lost, if anything, in the conclusions we can draw from studying an item that was meant to be physically felt, transported, and read in relation to other items around it? How can our primary documents "speak," when they are glazed in digitally scanned perfection? Many digital humanities scholars have noted that the digitization of historic documents provide more democratic access and increased searching power, but the important conclusions that come from the auratic experience of a magazine is partially lost in the name of large electronic data sets.¹³

These concerns are important, as the nature of humanities and historical research is increasingly digital, given the pressure to produce more scholarly work in shorter time periods in an economic state of decreased research funds.¹⁴ However, rather than rejoicing in the digital archive's speedy productive powers or proclaiming that we are ruining research quality and

skills by relying solely on the uncharted world of digital archives, one could embrace a hybrid approach to the magazine archive. In other words, researchers can utilize electronic archives to identify and initially analyze key materials and then move on to essential original copies to engage in the important insights coming from their aura.

To explore why a hybrid approach is necessary, I would like to focus on my experience with *Life* magazine. For part of my dissertation research, I have relied on Time-Life, Inc.'s decision in September 2009 to make all issues available through Google Books.¹⁵ Given that *Life* was published on a weekly basis as a news magazine from 1936 to 1972 and takes up approximately fifteen shelves at the nearest complete archive, this is incredibly helpful for researchers like me who have specific research questions across a magazine's lifespan. Yet, in only consulting *Life*'s digital repository, I have noticed the loss of the many physical sensations that Benjamin would argue cannot be housed in digital code. The oversized paper whose ink often leaves residue on your fingers is not felt. The subscription postcards with gradually increasing rates over the years are absent. The mailing labels revealing donations to libraries are missing. Readers' handwritten scribbles are non-existent. And the frustrating yet intriguing experience of clipped images and articles is avoided. All of these physical manifestations provide information that enrich my research and writing. The paper and ink show how *Life* was avant-garde in its printing style compared to other magazines. The subscription cards indicate who could afford magazines when the magazine was published. The mailing labels show who thought the magazine was important to preserve for the historic record. The handwritten messages and cuttings show hard-to-find reader reactions to controversial, interesting, or exciting content. Thus, the physical engagement with old magazines is important even if the experience of reading a magazine is not a researcher's immediate interest.

Additionally, magazines like *Life* were designed with specific logics in mind that influence its broader meaning. Each item within serves a different function and has various priorities depending on its placement and treatment in the magazine. For example, a *Life* feature that is prominently mentioned or photographed on a cover and placed near the front or middle of an issue indicates that the producers saw it as critical for drawing in readers. Likewise, the advertisements next to and around the item may have been placed strategically to coincide or contradict with what is found in the article.

It is difficult to ascertain this information when items are pulled out of context as individual results from a Google search. Although Google Books' *Life* archive allows for paging through entire magazines after retrieving key items, this process can be more cumbersome in digital form than with original copies since loading and toggling time can be slow, computer screens may not adequately fit double-page spreads, and previous and subsequent issues are not linked directly with an item of interest.

Furthermore, *Life's* physical attributes provide clues about the meaning that was produced through the magazine. The size of the magazine in relation to features, which cannot be easily replicated on users' varying computer screens, give an idea of the proportion of importance of an item. Moreover, scans do not adequately capture all colors and textures. Some colors such as red, orange, and gray do not translate well into some digital scans, which can impact how one reads and interprets the color codes built into an item. Lastly, one cannot see when different paper was used for specific magazine sections, which shows the magazine's high investment in an item at times when certain inks and papers were very expensive to publish on a mass scale.

The digital archive of *Life* is a media historian's dream as it affords the possibility to immediately sort through the full array of magazines in their perfect form, but, as Benjamin's argument reminds us, the mechanical digital reproduction can create a sense of distance from the printing of a magazine, its original and subsequent readers and the researcher.¹⁶ Furthermore, as Ken Hillis, Michael Petit and Kylie Jarrett discuss in their recent book *Google: The Power of Search*, we may become dependent upon the algorithm of the search tool that is still a mystery to many. This can be challenging given some researchers' grounded approach to their analysis. Can we trust the algorithms and tags applied to our data that might control the results we obtain? How does the algorithm inform and prioritize search results? Who has the power to determine how data is available from the digital archive? Lastly, could we face the problem of data overload? Or, are all of these questions a form of Luddite overreaction?

Many people will argue that like *Newsweek*, the eminent future for how we will access and read current magazines is a digital one. The same holds true for magazines of the past and how we media historians will conduct our research. As more historic magazines are digitized and made searchable, we

can celebrate the compression of the physical space of and proximity to our materials and the increased speed with which we can access and analyze these data. However, we need to proceed cautiously with many of the above questions and issues in mind. We should not forget the lived experiences and how physical attributes of magazines feed into their meaning and historical insight. The aura of the physically printed magazine should be preserved and not forgotten in our quest to understand our history, but we should also remember that we can get to that history even faster through the help of magazine archives available through the mysterious clouds of Google, ProQuest, and other online repositories. This essay presents more questions than answers on how to navigate digital and material archives, but as M.I. Franklin writes about Benjamin's essay on reproduction in relation to Donna Haraway's discussion of breaking limiting binaries in an increasingly digital world, it is essential to pose such questions that "spur discussion on fundamental issues" on how technological change alters the nature of our data, our research approaches, our relations with our materials and data, and our identities as media scholars.¹⁷

Notes

- 1 Tina Brown and Baba Shetty, "A Turn of the Page for Newsweek," *The Daily Beast*, October 18, 2012, www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/10/18/a-turn-of-the-page-for-newsweek.html.
- 2 For an academic treatment of the death of the magazine, see "Technology and Prevalent Revenue Models" in Timothy Havens and Amanda D. Lotz, *Understanding Media Industries* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2011), 55-57. For some recent popular discussions, see Olivier Laurent, "The New Economics of Photojournalism: The Death of Once Magazine," *British Journal of Photography*, September 4, 2012, www.bjp-online.com/british-journal-of-photography/report/2200635/the-new-economics-of-photojournalism-the-death-of-once-magazine; Michael S. Malone, "Silicon Insider: Death of a Magazine - ABC News," October 23, 2012, www.abcnews.go.com/Business/story?id=86895&page=1#.UM-U2L9EDZd; Ian Reeves, "The Slow Death of the Magazine," *The Independent*, August 17, 2007, www.independent.co.uk/news/business/analysis-and-features/the-slow-death-of-the-magazine-461900.html.

- 3 See Chapter 5, "Economic Conditions in Media Production" in Timothy Havens and Amanda D. Lotz, *Understanding Media Industries*, 95-126.
- 4 My work is not limited to *Life* and *Vogue*. I also examine other popular American magazines, such as *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Look*, *McCall's*, *Mademoiselle*, *National Geographic*, *Reader's Digest*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Woman's Home Companion*. I have chosen to discuss *Life* and *Vogue* here since these are examples of some of the first American magazines that are fully electronically archived.
- 5 Google Books' *Life* magazine archive has limited advanced options. One can search using multiple search keywords and Boolean operators (i.e., AND, OR, NOT). Moreover, one can limit search results to a specific date range. ProQuest's *Vogue* archive, however, allows even more searching power by allowing researchers to search by keywords within all magazines' text *and* images, with the additional possibility of searching by specific companies/brands, photographers, personalities, and contributors. *The Vogue Archive* allows for searching by data range, document type (i.e., advertisement, article, contributors, cover, fashion shoot, fiction, and index), and document feature (i.e., cartoon, chart, diagram, illustration, infographic, logo, and photograph).
- 6 Another possible approach is to go directly to the magazines of interest and start flipping through pages. Here, purposive sampling is imperative; otherwise, one is left to a sea of data that may not be helpful in one's research.
- 7 *Reader's Guide* consists of several products, including *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, *Reader's Guide Retrospective: 1890-1982*, *Reader's Guide Full-Text Mega*, *Reader's Guide Full-Text Select*. The *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* contains indexing and abstracts for major periodicals going back to 1983. *Reader's Guide Retrospective: 1890-1982* provides subject index searches for major periodicals between 1890 and 1982. *Reader's Guide Full-Text Mega* and *Select* provide indexical, abstract, and full-text searches for select major periodicals going back to 1994. My article focuses on the first two indexes since they are the traditional *Reader's Guide* indexes. More details on Ebsco Host's *Reader's Guide* products can be found on its website at <http://www.ebscohost.com/academic>.
- 8 Microfilm and microfiche present a set of unique issues similar to digital archives since they are copies of physical magazines. However, their major difference with digital archives is that they are physical copies on

film spindles or sheets in grayscale or black and white format. They need to be consulted in person using specialized viewing equipment, usually in a library. I would argue that microfilm and microfiche pose similar problems as digital archives discussed later in this essay (namely, loss of an originally printed magazine's "aura"). Yet unlike digital archives, microfilm and microfiche are usually not in full-color, which presents the impossibility of analyzing and seeing important color codes built into a magazine. I do not include a more thorough discussion of microfilm and microfiche due to space limitations and my focus on going from physical copies to digital copies.

- 9 This point is valid for any data collection, but particularly when sampling magazines using a subject index. It is important to note that *Reader's Guide* indexes all articles of a magazine by general subjects contained in each particular item. Although *Reader's Guide* is helpful to identify materials, terms may be applied in ways that do not necessarily apply to what you are looking for, or you may need to use more general terms to find items that are not covered by specific topics you have in mind. For example, in trying to identify magazine articles that discuss French women, some articles that I have found useful were not tagged with "women" or "woman" as the subject. Rather, "France" was the key subject indexing particular articles. As with working with any index or search engine (online or in print), one needs to be cognizant of what terms (and their variants) are used and how various subject terms are nested within other, more general terms. Quality research depends on how well a researcher is trained in using *Reader's Guide's* search functionalities in addition to the creative ways in which a researcher develops his/her search terms list.
- 10 More accessible research and information are needed on how search algorithms and user inputs affect the possible results one gets through such searches. Search mechanisms are not made equally and user mastery of search terms vary wildly, so information about one's search strategy in one's research is needed to best map one's research approach in the digital archive.
- 11 Stephan G. Nichols, "The End of Aura?" in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan, eds., *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 2003) 256.
- 12 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in John Hanhardt, ed., *Video Culture: A Critical*

- Investigation* (Salt Lake City, UT: G.M. Smith, 1986), 29.
- 13 For a discussion on the democratization of the library and archival materials through digital repositories and databases, see Benjamin Abrahamse, "Cataloging Matters for Digital Preservation," *The Serials Librarian* 57, no. 1–2 (2009): 48–50; Natalia Cecire, "Introduction: Theory and the Virtues of Digital Humanities," *Journal of Digital Humanities*, March 9, 2012, journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-1/introduction-theory-and-the-virtues-of-digital-humanities-by-natalia-cecire/; Maureen Jameson, "Promises and Challenges of Digital Libraries and Document Image Analysis: A Humanist's Perspective," *Document Image Analysis for Libraries, 2004. Proceedings. First International Workshop On* (2004): 54–61; Todd Presner, "Digital Humanities 2.0: A Report on Knowledge," *Connexions*, accessed May 19, 2013, <http://www.cnx.org/content/m34246/latest/>.
- 14 See note 13 in addition to Kathleen Fitzpatrick, "The Humanities, Done Digitally," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 8, 2011, www.chronicle.com/article/The-Humanities-Done-Digitally/127382/; and Matthew K. Gold, *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).
- 15 "LIFE" *Google Books*, n.d., http://www.books.google.com/books?id=NOEEAAAAMBAJ#all_issues_anchor. In addition to making *Life* completely available online, Time-Life also made most of its photography going back to the 1750s reachable through the Google Books platform. For Time, Inc.'s announcement see "Over 10 Million Images from the LIFE Photo Archive to Be Made Available on Google," November 18, 2008, <http://www.timeinc.com/pressroom/detail.php?id=releases/11182008.php>. Time-Life, Inc.'s photo archive on Google Books is available at "LIFE Photo Archive Hosted by Google," n.d. <http://www.images.google.com/hosted/life>.
- 16 Nicols, 256.
- 17 M. I. Franklin, "Reading Walter Benjamin and Donna Haraway in the Age of Digital Reproduction," *Information, Communication & Society* 5, no. 4 (2002): 613.

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