

Ten Questions to a Periodical Scholar

Margaret Beetham's publications include *A Magazine of her Own? Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine 1800-1914* (1996). She was an Associate Editor of the *Dictionary of Nineteenth Century Journalism in Great Britain and Northern Ireland* (2009), and is a Member of the Board of the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals, and a Senior Advisor to ESPRit (The European Society for Periodical Research). She is currently an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Salford.

1. WHICH MAGAZINE WOULD YOU HAVE LIKED TO BE AN EDITOR OF?

I am not sure that I would like to have been the editor of any of the nineteenth-century women's magazines I have studied. There is limited evidence from archive material of how these magazines were edited and, on the whole, I have not done that work, but I expect that the editorial process in most of them was quite complicated. *Woman at Home* (1893-1920), for example, was subtitled 'Annie S. Swan's Magazine' and she not only contributed regularly to the fiction but also wrote the two advice columns, 'Over the Teacups' and 'Love, Courtship and Marriage', which made the magazine famous. However, its editors were named as Robertson Nicoll and Jane Stoddart, so it was a complicated set of relationships. We tend to have a view of the Editor as all powerful and some, like Dickens, were very much in control but I don't think this was the only model. For some major nineteenth-century journals, we know that the editor was surrounded by a group who were regularly involved, as Patrick Leary has described in relation to *Punch*. Of course, I could never have been part of most of those nineteenth-century circles because I am a woman and they were very masculine groups. Two magazines which I would like to have been involved in editing are *The Englishwoman's Journal* and the *Women's Penny Paper*, which became the *Woman's Herald*. In the twentieth century, I think I would like to have been a fly on the wall during meetings of the *Spare Rib* editorial collective. I know that these were not always harmonious. Collaborative creative work is rarely easy, but it can be very productive.

2. WHAT IS THE ODDEST MAGAZINE YOU HAVE EVER ENCOUNTERED?

This is a very hard question for me to answer as it depends what you mean by 'odd.' Some of the magazines I have looked at were distinctive and the campaigning journals

were attacked and mocked by contemporaries but I find them endlessly interesting – as well as boring, of course, as most magazines are if you read through several years or even months.

3. WHICH MAGAZINE THAT IS NO LONGER AROUND DO YOU MISS MOST?

I miss *Spare Rib*, the feminist magazine that came out of and articulated many of the arguments of what is now called ‘second wave feminism,’ but which we called ‘Women’s Liberation’. It was launched in 1972 and began to be run by an editorial collective soon afterwards. It was feisty, argumentative and aimed to put into the public domain views by women about their lives and their femininity which were not those of the mainstream press. It covered literature and politics, articulating the argument that the personal is political, which has now become a cliché but was then part of an attempt to address and redress power imbalances, not only in the wider worlds of work and public life but also in the home. Some outlets, including W.H. Smith, the major newsagents, refused to stock it but its circulation figures, which I have seen quoted as 20,000 per month, did not represent its readership as it was often read in women’s groups, passed round, and shared between friends. It was – in this way – quite like many nineteenth-century periodicals, which we know often had multiple readers. It was the site of arguments between different feminisms but its disappearance in 1993 left a gap which has not been filled, despite various announcements of re-launches.

4. HOW AND WHEN DID YOU GET INTO PERIODICAL STUDIES?

When I left Oxford, having followed a very traditional English literature syllabus, I had no intention of working in a University. I decided to go back and do an MA some years later, partly as a result of teaching day-release classes in the Ferranti’s factory in Oldham, one of the Greater Manchester towns. I did some rather primitive oral history projects with the young women punch-card operators there. (This was long before the invention of computers.) That helped me decide to go back to do a higher degree but I wanted something which combined my interest in Literature with Social History. I found an interdisciplinary MA in Late Victorian Society at Manchester University. My early research interests were in the formation of identities in relation to class, gender and region and I began, and have continued, to work on local Lancashire periodicals, including those partly in dialect. I was fortunate enough to get a post in the English Department at Manchester Polytechnic, now Manchester Metropolitan University. There we worked collaboratively (and often with huge arguments) to develop new kinds of interdisciplinary courses which included popular culture, ballads, newspapers, and periodicals alongside ‘high’ literature. I worked closely with Brian Maidment, among others, and my research grew out of and fed back into my teaching in a way which is not possible for young researchers today. Periodicals were a neglected field but it seemed to me a crucial one in which social movements and literary practice came together. If I had known how difficult such research was, I would probably have chosen something else but it has been, and still is, hugely exciting.

5. WHY SHOULD WE READ THE *WOMAN'S MAGAZINE*?

Oh dear! That is a big question, which I spent most of my book (*A Magazine of her Own?*) trying to answer. In brief, magazines addressed specifically to women are important both for the reasons that any kind of popular periodical is worth studying and also for reasons specific to that genre. On the first of these, I would say that the magazine as a mixed genre is the place where developments in other genres are often visible. Poetry, fiction, articles on history and science, developments in theatre and music, all these are to be found in popular magazines, though the precise nature of the mixture will vary. Recently scholars have been discovering how important even quite 'low-brow' magazines were for publishing and disseminating poetry and science, for example. In addition, magazines were agents in social and political movements. They can give the historian a sense of how such movements changed through time because of the 'periodical' nature of the genre. As for women's magazines specifically, I would argue that, as well as adding to our understanding of the cultural, social and political landscape of the past in that general way, magazines aimed exclusively at women plotted the struggles over the meaning of gender. These magazines sought both to define and to bring into being certain kinds of femininity, posed against an assumed masculinity. This could vary from magazine to magazine. The women's suffrage journals offered a different model from the domestic magazines, which differed again from those which focused on fashion and the life of high society. However, they were often in dialogue with each other, as well as with the wider social and political order. Because the magazine comes out over time and because it often invites letters or other interventions from readers, we can see more clearly than in other literary forms, the dynamics of those struggles about how to live our gender in which women and men engaged, and still engage.

6. WHICH MAGAZINE EDITOR DO YOU IDENTIFY MOST WITH?

Again, I don't identify with any of the editors I have encountered, though I greatly admire Christian Johnstone, who edited *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* from 1834 to 1846. She seems to have been both decisive and inclusive and is one of those women editors it would be good to know more about. I wish I could identify with some of those women who pioneered what we broadly call 'women's rights' journals. Lydia Becker is one of my heroines. She lived and worked in Manchester, my home city, and she launched, largely financed, wrote and edited the *Women's Suffrage Journal* (1870-1890), the first journal dedicated to campaigning for women to get the vote, at the same time as she was organizing, lecturing and being involved in local political and educational work. I also admire Jessie Boucherett who edited *the English Women's Review* from 1866 to 1871. However, it seems somewhat arrogant to claim to identify with these remarkable women.

7. IS THERE A FUTURE FOR THE PRINT MAGAZINE?

I am probably of the wrong generation to answer that question. The death of print is constantly being proclaimed. However, the evidence seems to me mixed. When I look at

the shelves in my local shop I see little evidence of the disappearance of print but on the tram the other morning going into town, I was the only person with a print newspaper or magazine. I am a news junkie and I have to confess that I read newspapers in both forms but I still prefer print. For some people and for some genres (perhaps particularly the woman's magazine) the material qualities of print still hold attractions. These include the feel of glossy paper, being able to read it in the bath, feeling it is a treat.

8. DO YOU EVER DREAM OF MAGAZINES AND IF SO, ARE THOSE PLEASANT DREAMS?

Never, I am glad to say.

9. WHICH MAGAZINES DO YOU HAVE A SUBSCRIPTION TO?

At the moment I only subscribe to the *London Review of Books*, which is not a magazine but a twenty-first century reincarnation of the early nineteenth-century reviews. It comes out fortnightly, which has historically been a bit of an odd interval for publication but seems to work here. I read the print copy and I enjoy its commitment to serious and lengthy articles which are well written and usually avoid the worst of academic prose. I get a number of magazines through my support for various organizations, some of which I read and some of which – I am afraid – go straight into the paper recycling bin.

10. WHAT ARE YOUR AMBITIONS WITHIN THE FIELD OF PERIODICAL STUDIES?

I feel genuinely excited at what seems to me a new energy in periodical studies. The setting up of ESPRit, the European Society for Periodical Research, opens up possibilities for cross-national work. Period-specific organizations and research projects are thriving. We even have a local, North-West England Periodicals Research Group which meets once a term and spans a range of periods and disciplines. Above all, digital resources not only give access to many more students and researchers but enable completely new kinds of reading to be made. We are only at the beginning of that. Having been an old-fashioned, in the Library-among-the-dusty-tomes person, I feel that we need to hold onto the material copies and keep thinking about what the materiality of the periodical means. However, these different ways of reading, digital and paper, distant and close, should in my view be complementary rather than mutually exclusive in the broad field of study. Future work will obviously draw heavily on digital resources and that is already revolutionizing the field. I don't know what the next generation will do. I hope they will tell me. I believe that this kind of work will continue and grow in ways we cannot at the moment envisage.