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# Independent Magazines Today

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## Introduction

Periodical studies have produced a wealth of research by not only fostering transdisciplinary cooperation but also encouraging the crossing of national and language boundaries. Being grounded in departments of history, literature, culture and area studies ensures the careful and granular reading of issues and the recovery of neglected print archives and personal networks. However, contemporary independent magazines have not yet featured in the scholarly journals of the field.<sup>1</sup> Extending the scope of periodical studies with its emphasis on serialized imprints from the past, the study of contemporary magazines offers the opportunity of complementing the strengths of periodical studies with ‘magazine studies’. The latter focuses on the contemporary magazine market, its products, and practices, and is informed by disciplines that tend to be more oriented towards practical knowledge about magazines, like journalism, media and communication studies, as well as cultural studies. The recently published *Handbook of Magazine Studies* includes a chapter on independent magazines as a contemporary publishing phenomenon, a welcome discussion considering how this burgeoning field is otherwise largely ignored.<sup>2</sup> A special issue on independent magazines in a periodical studies journal is a *novum* and may serve to foster interdisciplinary encounters between two inherently interdisciplinary subfields: periodicals studies and magazines studies. This special issue further seeks to highlight the proliferation and vitality of magazines in a niche that is often overlooked, yet deserves closer analysis in order to understand its diversity on and off the page.

The following introduction to this special issue on ‘Independent Magazines Today’, therefore, first touches on some genealogical aspects of the development of indie aesthetics before discussing independent magazines’ investment in the niche audiences for whom magazines and their aesthetics may serve as a vehicle for diverse contemporary lifestyles. The last section briefly discusses ‘materiality’ and ‘affect’ as two possible key concepts to understanding the workings of indie magazines and their appeal, before introducing the three contributions.

- 1 With the exception of Alison Piepmeier, ‘Why Zines Matter: Materiality and the Creation of Embodied Community’, *American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism*, 18.2 (2008), 213–38.
- 2 Miglena Sternadori and Tim Holmes, eds, *The Handbook of Magazine Studies* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020); Megan Le Masurier, ‘Slow Magazines: The New Indies in Print’, in Sternadori and Holmes, pp. 92–104.

## Approaching ‘Indie’: A Tentative Genealogy

Although the term ‘indie’ is used to denote the contemporary independent magazine and appears in the naming of conventions, in the titles of online platforms, and in self-descriptions of magazine makers as if defining a clearly circumscribed field, this usage disguises the fact that ‘indie periodical publishing’ subsumes very different magazines and editorial philosophies, as well as geographically dispersed scenes. Highly successful titles can be found in lifestyle and design (*Kinfolk*, *frankie*, *Hello Mr.*), interior design (*Apartamento*), and slow journalism segments (*Delayed Gratification*) that sell advertising space to big-name brands and can be bought at high street newsstands, book shops, music and culture venues, museum shops, libraries, and designer stores. Yet, ‘indie’ primarily evokes small enterprises operating out of editors’ kitchens and selling issues at conventions or through their websites, a description that is true for a large section of titles. They could be run as moonlight projects by professionals working day jobs in the creative industries, even on mainstream magazines; they might originate as part of thesis work done at art schools and then extended to second and third issues; they might be created by graduates preparing a showpiece for interviews and job searches; or they could be founded by groups passionate about specific issues of representation or aesthetic experimentation (or both). The “‘creative cities’ of the democratized West’ are certainly the incubator of the recent boom and determine its demographic make-up, which is, nonetheless, set to change with, for example, projects by women of colour (WOC) and other minoritized groups using the magazine form to confront representation in mainstream media, often from an intersectional or queer perspective (*gal-dem*, *Plantain Papers*, *OOMK*).<sup>3</sup>

The term ‘independent’ has parallel lives in music and cinema, where ‘indie’ covers a range of practices, aesthetics, and shared expectations about genre, style, and valuation. With a focus on independent cinema, Michael Z. Newman identifies the complexity of creative autonomy as crucially ensuring that cultural expressions are (seen as) ‘authentic’ and thus in opposition to the perceived inauthentic mainstream. He writes that ‘indie cinema is a cultural form opposing dominant structures at the same time that it is a source of distinction that serves the interests of a privileged group within those structures’.<sup>4</sup> Wendy Fonarow, in her study of British indie music, argues that, within the scene, indie is understood to be ‘the commitment to individual artistic expression. The individual is able to envision an idea, produce it, and then distribute it to the public without intervention’. And, already inherent in the term, she observes that ‘indie’, a grammatical diminutive, implies not only ‘affection’ but also — very literally — size and scope in terms of budget, production values, and audiences, with resulting roughness, flaws, and imperfections vouching for artists’ seriousness.<sup>5</sup> ‘Littleness’ also evokes the prohibitively avantgardist character of the ‘little magazines’ that circulated among modernist intellectual circles in the early twentieth century, where this restricted access translates into exclusivity and membership in a cultural elite.<sup>6</sup>

The ‘little’, and hence authentic and/or avantgarde, is thus inscribed in the segment but manifests differently across media. Formulations of indie in adjacent fields

3 Megan Le Masurier, ‘Independent Magazines and the Rejuvenation of Print’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 15.4 (2012), 383–98 (p. 384).

4 Michael Z. Newman, ‘Indie Culture: In Pursuit of the Authentic Autonomous Alternative’, *Cinema Journal*, 48.3 (2009), 16–34 (p. 17).

5 Wendy Fonarow, *Empire of Dirt: The Aesthetics and Rituals of British Indie Music* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), pp. 52, 45, 63.

6 For a brief summary of the variety of little magazines, Suzanne W. Churchill and Adam McKible, ‘Little Magazines and Modernism: An Introduction’, *American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism*, 15.1 (2015), 1–5.

give an impression of the term's facets as a distinguishing signifier and practice, defining and idealizing itself in opposition to a variously conceived 'mainstream', providing opportunities for consumption and communion for a select audience, and evoking remnants or dominance of DIY ethics that allows for, presumably, unadulterated creative freedom. On this, Newman quotes Derek Jarman's quip that 'the budget is the aesthetic'.<sup>7</sup>

The context for such a relational definition of 'indie', contrasting its ethos with the commercial, mass culture, or 'mainstream' production of film, music and print, places independent magazines within the larger field of 'creative industries'. The term, originating in the economic policies of the 1990s, has allowed cultural and media studies to focus on the production side of cultural products, investigate the self-image of practitioners, and correlate ideals of creative work with its economic, financial, and social strictures.<sup>8</sup> While this invites critics to view indie magazines as the product of often precarious creative labour, financial instability, staking and accruing cultural capital, and self-descriptions feeding off the image of an overreaching mainstream, the magazines must also be considered as aesthetic objects.

In his 2016 collection of interviews with indie magazine publishers, Jeremy Leslie suggested a definition of the indie mag that emphasizes a specific aesthetics, alongside their relationship to the 'mainstream':

Independent magazines indulge their very magazine-ness. Reversing the manufacturing commoditisation of the mainstream, their publishers relish the use of heavier weights and different types of paper, they use extra inks and experiment with other special effects. For them, a magazine is as much as anything an object, a physical item endowed with qualities that appeal to multiple senses — smell, sound, touch as well as sight. Their makers are open-minded about what a magazine can be.<sup>9</sup>

Leslie's emphasis on the material make-up of the indie magazine, rather than its content, highlights the impossibility of finding a definition that stems from the wide variety of themes and topics covered, ranging from the specialist and niche to the sweeping and political. For example, *MC1R* bills itself as 'the magazine for redheads' (named after the gene that codes for red hair) and *kapsel* publishes translations of Chinese short fiction and commentary on sinofuturism, while *Delayed Gratification* provides in-depth reporting on breaking news stories of the three months preceding its quarterly issue; *Fantastic Man* and its sister publication the *Gentlewoman* are successful fashion and lifestyle titles that are widely stocked, but they share the designation of 'indie' with the experimental box magazine *Unemployed* whose each issue consists of a collection of objects.

*Unemployed* raises the issue of historicizing indie magazines and possibilities for opening up the genealogies of independent periodical publishing in order to frame present issues. Mainstream news and lifestyle magazines, for which indies seek to provide an alternative, serve as a model for a host of independent publications. Rather than all-out experimentation, these indies seek to slot themselves into the expectations shaped by commercial titles, doing so by tweaking, remodeling, and shifting their emphases and themes. Des Tan, the founder of *Oh Comely* magazine, comments on her publication: 'Most women's magazines make me angry. I feel they're damaging society with their obsession with weight, appearance and "are you good enough?" quizzes. They

7 Newman, p. 20.

8 David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker, *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 6–8.

9 Jeremy Leslie, 'Introduction', in *Independence: 12 Interviews with Magazine Makers*, ed. by Jeremy Leslie (London: magCulture, 2016), pp. 9–12 (p. 11).

inspire me to make something that will change people's lives'.<sup>10</sup> The central point in this description is one of substitution — if not at newsagents, then in the everyday and imaginary lives of readers.

*Unemployed's* concept may help determine a tentative historical bracket for indies. *Unemployed* adopts the innovative shape of *Aspen* magazine (1965–71), another periodical that came in the form of a cardboard box filled with objects. *Aspen* belonged to a stream of artists' magazines that were launched in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s as a means to circumvent the gallery system and make art accessible outside institutions. Technologically facilitated by offset printing, which made production cheaper and easier to manage, as Gwen Allen notes, 'the magazine was an ideal expressive vehicle for art that was more concerned with concept, process, and performance than final marketable form'. In the process, the art magazine turned from the vehicle into the object of artistic engagement, and publishers 'investigated the distinct materiality of the magazine as well as its unique properties as a form of communication' — 'a medium in its own right'.<sup>11</sup> This willingness to experiment with the magazine form can also be found in today's indie magazines, often heightened by an aversion to the dominance of digital media that inspired a 'return' to print, resulting in the relishing of 'magazine-ness' that Leslie observed.

Coeval with the inception of the experimental artists' magazines that Allen discusses, independent periodicals were embroiled in politics and established a thriving independent underground print landscape, commonly discussed as the underground press of the 1950s and 1960s and most prominently embodied in, for example, the *Village Voice*. Scholars have produced a body of work on the politically radical magazines and newspapers that constituted a large part of the underground as a historically specific subculture coalescing around anti-establishment sensibilities and politics.<sup>12</sup> Hence, as Robert J. Glessing maintains, alongside 'an indifference to economics', intensely personal styles of reporting and openly biased and one-sided journalism characterized the underground press.<sup>13</sup> In the 1970s, John McMillian argues, underground papers became more financially stable and espoused more mainstream journalistic standards, thereby distinguishing themselves from the radical press of the preceding decades as the 'alt-weeklies'.<sup>14</sup> Today, alternative journalism plays a role in those indies that are less concerned with editing and curating and more interested in politics. This segment has seen a rise in popularity with the climate emergency and populist politics, engendering activist popular responses. For example, the indie mag *Good Trouble* is printed on newsprint in broadsheet format thus aligning itself with this radical, underground tradition by reporting on political and artistic forms of resistance. Today, alternative journalism retains an 'explicitly partisan character'. However, with the range of themes and topics covered in independent magazines, this partisanship does not necessarily consist of simply political alignment, but may rather concern an affiliation with local or imagined transnational communities defined by interests, identities, and tastes, as well as with these groups' specific concerns and views.<sup>15</sup> The unapologetic specificity of

10 Des Tan and stackmagazines, 'Oh Comely issue 17', *stackmagazines.com* (September 2013) [accessed 08 January 2020].

11 Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), p. 1.

12 For example, Robert J. Glessing, *The Underground Press in America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1970), Laurence Leamer, *The Paper Revolutionaries: The Rise of the Underground Press* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), Nigel Fountain, *Underground: The London Alternative Press 1966–74* (London: Routledge, 1988).

13 Glessing, pp. 7, 99.

14 John Campbell McMillian, *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 173–78.

15 Chris Atton and James F. Hamilton, *Alternative Journalism* (London: SAGE, 2008), pp. 86–87.

themes and self-imposed limitation of topics, coupled with a DIY ethos, also clearly suggest the zine cultures of punk and Riot Grrrl feminism as touchstones. The reaction of punk zine *Sniffin' Glue's* founder to reading the *New Musical Express* was 'I can do this', echoing self-descriptions of other indie editors, like Des Tan's inspiration 'to make something' herself that would empower her readers' lives.<sup>16</sup> However, punk zine's pointed dilettantism has been erased by sometimes slick — and usually sophisticated — designs that outdo mainstream titles (and tend to be copied by them).

Defining and describing underground papers, Glessing argues, may start from the literalization of the metaphor, asking 'under which ground' the publication positions itself and what 'overground' it pushes against.<sup>17</sup> In different variations and degrees of intensity, this identity may also be found in the self-image of independent magazine publishers today. While most indies are not defined by clear political commitment, the notion of being 'an other' to a variously conceived mainstream does shine through and even determines the shape of the magazine. Although the moniker 'indie' (or independent magazine) may not endure, and is indeed contested, the diminutive entails characteristics that are worth exploring when approaching independent titles.

### Niche Aesthetics and Reading Communities

In the context of a floundering mass-market of magazines, the indie press stands for a print revival in recent years. Despite the often limited lifespan of magazine projects and the often precarious conditions of their production, independent magazine publishing pushes the boundaries of content, form, and design. Independent magazines do not focus on mass marketing, but highlight innovation, unorthodox thinking, and a reader-first mentality. In doing so, independent magazines give space to different perspectives, provide a platform for diverse cultural knowledges, and render marginalized voices visible on their printed pages. While the turn to digital media challenges the mainstream lifestyle press and forces publishers to turn their products into transmedial, branded platforms, frequently side-lining print, digitization at the same time has facilitated the rise of independent magazines. Now widely available tools like crowdfunding, desktop publishing, and design software, as well as online distribution and communication channels, have turned magazine publishing into a creative project that may be realized on a smaller and more immediate scale. As a working definition, within this wide spectrum of print, digital, and face-to-face realizations, independent magazines are a branch distinguished by three main features: their publishing structure, their close connections to their audiences, and their link to subcultures, milieus, or tribes.

First of all, publications without corporate financing and periodicals under the direction of independent, innovative editors or publishers are commonly called indie magazines. Editors of independent magazines often start out as entrepreneurs launching small-scale publications as side-projects. The costs associated with such a start-up endeavor necessitate cultivating the second defining feature of indie magazines: a dedicated audience.<sup>18</sup> The expanding appeal of indie magazines in recent years,

16 Mark Perry and Daniel Dylan Wray, 'How we made punk fanzine *Sniffin' Glue*', *Guardian* (10 December 2019) [accessed 1 January 2020].

17 Glessing, p. 6. For an explication of the underground metaphor, see Jan-Frederik Bandel, 'Underground', in *Handbuch Literatur & Pop*, ed. by Moritz Baßler and Eckhard Schumacher (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), pp. 304–25.

18 Susan E. Thomas, 'Zeroing In on Contemporary: Independent Visual Arts Magazines', *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America*, 26.1 (2007), 40–50 (p. 40); Vanessa Thorpe, 'Smart, Cool ... and in Print: How Indy Mags Became all the Rage', *Guardian* (22 July 2018) [accessed 4 November 2019]; Conor Purcell, 'The Rise of Independent Magazines: "It's Never Been Easier"', *Irish Times* (14 May 2018) [accessed 4 November 2019].

linked to an increasingly fractured field of readers, has resulted in market niches and specialized communities of interest. In return, modern indie magazines cater to their niche audiences by interacting closely with their readership and responding to readers' interests. Through this exchange, magazine and audience mutually shape one another and build a community identity together.<sup>19</sup> Third, indie magazines are an outgrowth of contemporary indie culture. Due to a determination to differentiate themselves from the mainstream, indie magazines often explore the limits of the print format with their creative designs and thus have commonly become an indicator of high-quality content.<sup>20</sup> As a result of the interplay of this trio of defining features, indie magazines centre around the unique content of their publication and the communal bonds woven between makers and audiences.

A magazine is not only a cultural product printed on paper, but a practice of engagement with the reader, as well as a performance of interaction among the imagined community of journalists, editors, and readers.<sup>21</sup> In this light, with diverse realizations ranging from weekly glossies to hefty, annual publications — from interactive pop-up events to digital supplements of complementary websites — magazines are multifaceted and constantly evolving publications. Any scholarly approach to the genre, thus, has to contend with a highly diverse and dynamic field, with a myriad of titles that are rarely, if ever, collected and catalogued. In fact, it seems impossible to give an exhaustive overview that goes beyond either the 'big' titles that have earned a standing with a wide readership (see Oliver Scheiding's article on *Kinfolk*) or the second tier of magazines that may aspire to this status — and/or register in dedicated indie magazine networks and their infrastructures, ensuring their appearance in online search queries (see Natasha Anderson's article on *Flaneur*). Magazine projects that fall outside these categories are often extremely difficult to locate, only showing up as serendipitous finds. For these medium and small — in terms of circulation and visibility — magazines, access and rarity may become part of their appeal and are certainly integral to notions of 'indie periodical culture' (see Sabina Fazli's article on *Sabat* and *Momma Tried*).

For at least a decade, indies have increasingly gained visibility in the mainstream media and at newsstands, creating their own transnational audiences and communities of readers by targeting specific subcultural niches, urban styles, and tribes through their reliance on print and its material, aesthetic, and affective qualities. Defining themselves against a mass-market glossy aesthetic, independent magazines still self-consciously engage with mainstream aesthetic conventions, which they adopt, parody, transform, innovate, break down, and re-assemble. Indies follow different strategies to set themselves apart from both the mainstream press and digital media by either capitalizing on their 'printy-ness' — that is, the media-specific visuality and hapticity of the printed page — or experimenting with hybrid forms that dissolve the boundaries of the page and genre. The online shop [Pics & Ink](#), for example, which specializes in indie magazines, advertised its opening with a full-page advertisement in independent publications with copy describing them as 'Word writing / Paper stroking / Print sniffing

19 Sumin Zhao, 'Selling the "Indie Taste": A Social Semiotic Analysis of *frankie* Magazine', in *Critical Multimodal Studies in Popular Culture*, ed. by Emilia Djonov and Sumin Zhao (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), pp. 143–59 (p. 143). This development can be attributed to the same trend which first led to the rise of newspapers as early as the seventeenth century by targeting more specialized audiences than the general readership addressed by nineteenth-century magazines; see Tim Holmes and Jane Bentley, 'Specialist Magazines as Communities of Taste', in *The Routledge Companion to British Media History*, ed. by Martin Conboy and John Steel (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 273–84 (p. 281); Tim Holmes and Liz Nice, *Magazine Journalism* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011), pp. 3, 20.

20 Purcell; Thorpe.

21 Tim Holmes and Jane Bentley, 'Specialist Magazines as Communities of Taste', in *The Routledge Companion to British Media History*, ed. by Martin Conboy and John Steel (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 273–84 (p. 276).

/ Ink smearing / Pic taking / Idea loving / Print believers', evoking the tactility of the object.<sup>22</sup> It 'has a sensuous aspect [...] there is a tactility to the paper as it rolls across the thumb, you can smell the ink, the design has a weight, a body, it appeals to the senses as well as the intellect'.<sup>23</sup> Timothy Holmes claims that carrying magazines around for others to see and admire serves as 'a kind of look-at-this-cool-stuff-I'm-reading pose'.<sup>24</sup> The object here serves as an outward projection of the reader's initiation into 'this-cool-stuff' — promoting one's personal, cultural, and professional identity.

With its turn to the warm materiality of print in the niche revival of a medium that had been pronounced dead in the face of digital competition, the indie magazine scene may be compared to the equally unlikely persistence of vinyl, with specialized magazine shops serving as hubs for the initiated, similar to record stores. Indeed, independent titles often exhibit a self-awareness of magazine and design history, the 'golden years' of magazine publishing, as well as the genealogy of specific influential titles which are at times evoked in visual and textual references for a knowing audience. Although indie magazines often rely on crowdfunding and online shops for distribution, they also tend to frame their emphasis on tactility, the choice of different paper stock, etc., as a turn away from the impoverished sensual uniformity of screen media.

### Materiality and Affect

For indie editors, a magazine is something that appeals to multiple senses, including sight, touch, smell, and hearing, allowing for more dramatic combinations than would be possible in titles that have to sell at newsstands. Apart from that, print is also regarded as something more permanent, and as Alec Dudson, editor of *Intern* magazine, states, '[i]t adds another layer of reality and achievement if it's physical and not virtual'.<sup>25</sup> There are many reasons why people still prefer to read print magazines. Despite the fact that, at times, it may be more convenient to simply go online and access the magazines' content on smart phones or tablets, print magazines have qualities that the swipeable surfaces of digital screens cannot offer. Perhaps most importantly, print magazines are material objects.

As distinct material objects, (indie) magazines can be classified into what sociologists call semiotic-imaginary artefacts, or 'things produced primarily with the intention of transporting signs, images and imaginations calculated to affect people'.<sup>26</sup> These include texts, images, and acoustic signals. Such multimodal print objects 'aim to arouse feelings of identification or to change people's lives', and their visual components produce 'affects of fascination for certain forms of subjectivity or compassion for discriminated social groups'.<sup>27</sup> Independent magazines in general offer different, often shocking, points of view on a wide range of topics.<sup>28</sup> Both their themes and their design function as bearers of either positive or negative affects. Unlike

22 'Pics & Ink', *Ob Comely*, 45 (2018), 55.

23 Joseph Monteyne, 'Preface', in *Inside Magazines: Independent Pop Culture Magazines*, ed. by Patrik Andersson and Judith Steedman (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2002), pp. 6–7 (p. 7).

24 Tim Holmes, 'Magazines and Promotion', in *Promotional Culture and Convergence: Markets, Methods, Media*, ed. by Helen Powell (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 173–90 (p. 174).

25 Alec Dudson and Jeremy Leslie, 'Intern', in *Independence: 12 Interviews with Magazine Makers*, ed. by Jeremy Leslie (London: MagCulture, 2016), pp. 159–72 (p. 171).

26 Andreas Reckwitz, 'Practices and Their Affects', in *The Nexus of Practices: Connections, Constellations, Practitioners*, ed. by Allison Hui and Theodore Schatzki (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 114–25 (p. 124).

27 Reckwitz, p. 124.

28 In her analysis of the indie magazine *frankie*, Sumin Zhao explains that independent magazines present '[t]he imperfect, everyday, and the gritty as opposed to the highly stylized and "deterritorialized" fantasy world of the mainstream women's glossies' (p. 148).



mainstream magazines, indies' aesthetics play a more important role, as its function is more immediate. Sometimes, the emphasis on design appears to be stronger than on content. Most independent magazines offer, nevertheless, next to their unique design, strong and compelling writing. Furthermore, their curated arrangement of texts, photography, and illustrations contributes to the magazines' unique personalities. Independent magazines like *Kinfolk*, especially, focus on both design and content, which is frequently expressed through images and illustrations instead of words. The emphasis on design is a response to modern culture and its stylistic self-consciousness, as well as the choices it offers for aesthetic communication and the creation of specific taste communities. Besides, growing digital literacy shapes the reader's expectations of how magazines should be designed. Art directorship and design teams play a central role in shaping the magazine's visual personality. For instance, as John L. Walters, editor of *Eye* magazine, explains, 'the choice of the art director is driving what gets written'. It is the synergy between editorial content and art direction which frequently brings indie magazines to life, to the point that 'graphic design is as important as journalistic content'.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the fact that the majority of independent magazines are published strictly in printed form, digital technologies are an important part of their production, distribution, promotion, and sourcing of contributions. In contrast to the mainstream magazine market, which has been struggling with growing competition and the migration of advertisers since the rise of the internet, independent magazine makers use it to their advantage. Furthermore, as online communication dissolves national boundaries, magazines are no longer restricted by geography, which means that reaching potential readers is now easier than ever. Indie producers are active on social media in order to keep up with the changing demands of society and to promote their product. However, they value the traditional magazine form and disagree with the recent tendency of mainstream magazines to cease print production and publish solely online instead.<sup>30</sup>

### Independent Magazines Today: Case Studies

Latham and Scholes's call to regard periodicals as objects of study in their own right rather than as 'containers' of extractable information has now been heeded in the context of historical studies of periodicals.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, we propose to extend the scope of materials to both the contemporary magazine market and the indie magazine scene including its aesthetics and personal networks. In what follows, we propose that reading indies as part of the contemporary periodical landscape brings into view a host of publications that are usually left out of investigations and that are 'different', putting to the test against our preconceptions and methods when approaching magazines. The case studies assemble different formats and practices of fostering and engaging reading communities through their aesthetics, materiality, and affordances. They also show that the label independent magazine is frequently misunderstood by narrowly

29 Walters and Leslie, pp. 141–42; Le Masurier, p. 389.

30 Over the last decade, a considerable number of mainstream magazines have started to either reduce the number of their printed issues or shut down their print operations entirely. In 2018, for instance, two successful US teen magazines, *Teen Vogue* and *Seventeen*, and the women's glossy *Glamour* turned into digital-only magazines, followed by *Marie Claire* UK in 2019. A US survey carried out in 2015 by Two Sides, an organization representing the paper and print industry, proves, however, that people generally prefer to read from paper rather than from electronic devices. Two Sides reports that '75% indicated that they were more relaxed and receptive when reading a magazine in print compared to 26% when reading a magazine on screen. Differences among age groups were minor, with over 73% of all age groups preferring to read a magazine in print.' 'Two Sides releases results of new U.S. survey: Reading from Paper or Reading from Screens: What do Consumers Prefer?' *Two Sides* (23 June 2015), no page.

31 Sean Latham and Robert Scholes, 'The Rise of Periodical Studies', *PMLA*, 121.2 (2006), 517–31.

emphasizing the indies' countercultural and anti-hegemonic nature. The three case studies illustrate, nonetheless, that the label independent magazine refers to a plethora of imprints that invite different material and aesthetic practices for gathering together people and things. The three contributions to this special issue show that producers of independent magazines specifically focus on issues that only print can articulate through its particular affordances, experimenting with format, material, or design. In this special issue, we want to discuss four transnational independent magazines which variously engage with the perceived opposition between independent and mainstream sensibilities, as well as that between print and digital. On the one hand, *Sabat* (2016–), *Momma Tried* (2013–), and *Flaneur* (2013–) experiment with the magazine and its material 'body', as well as the magazine's fusion of visual fragments, reflecting on both the aesthetics and conjured demise of print. *Kinfolk* (2011–), on the other hand, with financial success, cultivates its globally recognizable minimalist visual style and aims to monetize its brand beyond the printed magazine.

Sabina Fazli's article considers two contemporary independent magazine projects, *Sabat* and *Momma Tried*, both of which set out to extend the resources of meaning-making available in the format to its material makeup. As 'micro media' with 'micro readerships', the magazines provide corresponding 'micro-archives', cultivating a sense of nostalgia and anticipating a future recovery of the present moment, as captured in the volumes.<sup>32</sup> While this conceives of the magazine as a stable record, both magazines also engage with different strategies of dismantling and transforming the magazine form in its interaction with the reader and a changing media ecology.

Natasha Anderson's contribution considers *Flaneur*, an English-language periodical published in Germany and distributed worldwide. *Flaneur* examines a single street of a city, moving to different countries in different continents in each issue, via the creative use of various visual materials to construct multimedia fragments into a cosmopolitan collage, drawing on the nineteenth-century figure of the *flâneur* as explorer of the cityscape. The mosaic content and the multilayered flexibility of this independent magazine function as the driving force in *Flaneur's* goal to both create imagined communities and establish an embodied, emotional reading experience.

Oliver Scheiding's essay 'Indie Magazines as Brands: Aesthetic Communication and the *Kinfolk* Experience' explores the growth of a local independent magazine and how it has become the decade's most visible print phenomenon of lifestyle content. Focusing on the magazine's visual and material transformations since its launch in 2011, the essay analyzes a number of aesthetic domains like image, narrative, design, and advertisements to disclose how the magazine's organizational culture revolves around a dense network of creative minds, designers, and art directors. As such, *Kinfolk* curates a lifestyle that pretends to rescue the world from the ills of manipulation and compulsive conformity. By examining the magazine's redesigns, the essay shows how *Kinfolk* — in the context of a global creative industry — continually reflects upon its status as an indie magazine and, in doing so, applies an advanced neo-modernist aesthetics to maintain its subcultural capital.

Together, the three papers address examples of contemporary indie publishing, probe case studies and close readings of periodicals-outside-the-mainstream, and widen the discussion by developing further magazine scholarship within the larger field of periodical studies. Materiality and affect represent two approaches that allow for analyses of indie magazines' media-specific affordances and tie in with concerns in qualitative research within periodicals studies. Both perspectives contribute to the

32 Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2013), p. 210; Le Masurier, p. 388.

project of making periodicals the object of research (Latham and Scholes) and open avenues into the history of the current indie publishing phenomenon that may follow the print sensibilities of avantgardes, marginalised groups, and creative minds.

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