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Periodicals and Belonging?

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the notion of belonging in periodical studies, arguing that periodicals have historically functioned as spaces for negotiating and performing belonging. Amid contemporary political rhetoric about borders and belonging, we examine how periodicals have both constructed and contested boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Drawing on interdisciplinary frameworks from political geography, psychology, and cultural studies, we propose that belonging operates through periodicals in multiple dimensions: material (through physical production, layout, and tactile engagement), temporal (connecting past, present, and imagined futures), spatial (creating real and imagined communities across geographical boundaries), and affective (generating emotional attachments that bind readers together). The special issue presents six articles examining how periodicals foster belonging in institutional and professional communities (regimental journals and film criticism); place-based belonging; activism and resistance (revolutionary soldier newspapers and alternative magazines for marginalized groups). Together, these studies reveal how periodicals simultaneously challenge and reinforce boundaries of inclusion, offering valuable insights into contemporary challenges of polarization and fragmentation in our contemporary sociopolitical landscape.

KEYWORDS

periodical studies, belonging, materiality, community, inclusion/exclusion

> 'the brutality of borders is now a fundamental given of our time. Borders are no longer sites to be crossed but lines that separate.'[1]

At the time of writing, UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer suggested in a speech on migration that the UK risks becoming an 'island of strangers'.[2] Such rhetoric reflects broader global trends toward hardening boundaries. Despite sociologist Manuel Castells' observation that meaningful belonging has shifted away from national and state civil societies toward reconstructed defensive identity communities,[3] the politics of belonging in today's liberal democracies and mass media determine who is included and who is out, who belongs and who does not. In this 'dirty work of boundary maintenance', what do periodical studies have to offer?[4]

Some might argue that periodicals belong to the past, as fewer people read magazines or newspapers, leading to the closure of thousands of titles. Many of us periodical scholars engage with historical periodicals in digital archives more than we read contemporary titles. It might become more challenging to engage students about these visual and material printed objects if they are no longer part of their lives, and more difficult to persuade university managers, funders, government, and the public that periodical research has value or relevance. Are periodicals now merely of historical interest, fragile pages frozen in time, serving only as repositories of collective memory and identity?

Yet in the shadows of the explosion of digital-led creativity and media making, there has been a resurgence in the production of small-scale, independently owned printed magazines made by young 'digital natives', informed and aided by digital literacy. But the medium of choice for their periodicals remains print.[5] These publications often serve functions similar to those of their historical counterparts through their physicality, 'the material, tactile qualities of print', which digital media lacks.[6] Readers are drawn to their covers, which not only label the periodical titles but also those who possess them, connecting with their 'values, dreams and needs'.[7] This material dimension creates a tangible manifestation of belonging.

Periodicals, whether 'indie', middlebrow, mainstream, or highbrow, have always served as declarations of identity and manifestations of community, with many deliberately challenging dominant cultural narratives by rendering marginalized voices visible and offering them spaces of belonging. This introduction defines the 'messy' concept of belonging before demonstrating how periodicals have served as vital spaces for negotiating and performing belonging across contexts ranging from military communities to diasporic groups, from professional circles to socially marginalized identities.

1 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Duke University Press, 2019), p. 3.
2 Rajeev Syal, 'UK Risks Becoming "Island of Strangers" Without More Immigration Curbs, Starmer Says', *The Guardian*, 12 May 2025 [accessed 15 May 2025].
3 Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, Culture*, 3 vols (Blackwell, 1996–98).
4 John Crowley, 'The politics of belonging: some theoretical considerations', in *The Politics of Belonging: Migrants and Minorities in Contemporary Europe*, ed. by Andrew Geddes and Adrian Favell (Ashgate, 1999), pp. 15–41.
5 Megan Le Masurier, 'Independent Magazines and the Rejuvenation of Print', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 15.4 (2012), pp. 383–98.
6 Natasha Anderson, Sabina Fazli, and Oliver Scheiding, 'Independent Magazines Today', *Journal of European Periodical Studies*, 5.2 (2020), pp. 1–11.
7 Ellen McCracken, cited in David Crowley, *Magazine Covers* (Mitchell Beazley, 2003), p. 7.

On Belonging

While the sense of belonging is recognized as a fundamental human need with wide-ranging impacts on mental, physical, and social outcomes, research across disciplines remains fragmented and inconsistent in terminology and approach. The notion of belonging to a family, a trade or a profession, a local culture, a national or a diaspora group, and their respective host of cultural and political ideas is intrinsic to periodical studies, as is research on communities of authors/contributors, publishers, and readers. As an analytical lens, however, belonging is largely under-theorized and frequently conflated with identity or citizenship —conflations that typically assume a sphere of common understanding.

In psychology, Allen et al. suggest that belonging can be approached through dimensions such as competencies for belonging; opportunities to belong; motivations to belong; and perceptions of belonging, all of which dynamically interact within social, cultural, environmental, and temporal contexts to create a sense of belonging.[8] Political geographer Marco Antonsich proposes two key dimensions: 'place-belongingness' referring to the personal, intimate feeling of being 'at home' in a place; and the 'politics of belonging' in which belonging constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion.[9] Within Antonsich's framework, culture and language — and for our purposes, their printed manifestations in periodicals — contribute to 'place-belongingness'.[10]

Building on this geographical perspective, human geography scholars position belonging as central to their discipline, emphasizing how it connects materiality to place through practices of boundary-making and inhabitation.[11] As gender and cultural studies scholar Elspeth Probyn argues, we 'long' to belong even when this 'longing is for belonging on the outside'.[12] Beyond gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or class, the formation of belonging has affective dimensions and hence is often messy and ambiguous — more of a process of becoming than a fixed state.[13] Embedded in everyday practices, belonging is often negotiated, contested, and politically charged.[14]

Belonging is not always a positive or progressive concept. The politics of belonging involve creating boundaries between 'us' and 'them', manifest in print media as in other fields. The mechanisms of community-building through print have often been deployed to construct exclusionary and, at times, violent notions of belonging. Fascist publications and their engagement in virulent practices of marginalization and othering have demonstrated this darker potential. *Not belonging* as the flipside of belonging highlights forms of exclusion, racialization, agonism, and conflict, illustrating how periodical 'communities' have historically served both to connect and divide.

This darker side is where the study of periodicals and belonging remains significant today. In examining periodical readerships, we can see how notions of belonging can function oppressively through the enforcement of boundaries, identities, and stereotypes. Such analysis allows us to understand how magazines and newspapers have constructed

8 Kelly-Ann Allen, Margaret L. Kern, Christopher S. Rozek, Dennis M. McInerney, and George M. Slavich, 'Belonging: A Review of Conceptual Issues, an Integrative Framework, and Directions for Future Research', *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 73.1 (2021), pp. 87–102.

9 Marco Antonsich, 'Searching for Belonging — An Analytical Framework', *Geography Compass*, 4.6 (2010), pp. 644–59.

10 Ibid.

11 Kathleen Mee and Sarah Wright, 'Geographies of Belonging', *Environment and Planning A*, 41.4 (2009), pp. 772–79.

12 Elspeth Probyn, *Outside Belongings* (Taylor and Francis, 1996).

13 Marco, 'Searching for Belonging', pp. 644–59.

14 Mee and Wright, 'Geographies of Belonging', pp. 772–79.

antagonistic divisions between those who belong and those who are seen as enemies and to demonstrate that the 'dynamics of unbelonging and exclusion' are closely linked.[15]

Periodicals as Spaces of Belonging *in Time*

All periodicals — by their very material, spatial, and temporal dimensions — are vehicles for the sharing and exchange of ideas, interests, identities, and experiences. The fixed-on-the-page space of periodicals does not merely reflect existing communities but actively forms a sense of connection amongst readers who will never meet. Periodicals mediate, define, negotiate, and transform collective identities while shaping readers' experiences and understanding.

The material conditions of periodicals are central to their function as spaces of belonging. The physical production, distribution, and consumption of periodicals as objects encourage particular reading practices — page-to-page reading or non-linear dipping in and out — and create shared experiences among readers. Paratextual elements mediate these experiences through 'the art of channelling the readers' gaze' pull-out spreads, postcard cut-outs, and page layouts that establish hierarchies and create relationships between body text, headings, and captions.[16] Editorial strategies further enhance this sense of belonging. Periodicity, regular sections, letters to the editor — serving as 'archives of feelings'[17] — competitions, and advertisements all invite reader participation and interaction, fostering belonging in aesthetic, visual, and material terms. Engaging with periodicals has affective dimensions, much like belonging itself, that are often messy and ambiguous. Periodicals generate emotional attachments that bind communities together, creating 'affective periodical encounters'.[18]

The very process of producing periodicals embodies practices of belonging. Unlike books, which may emerge from solitary creation, periodicals are inherently collaborative enterprises involving editors, writers, artists, designers, printers, and distributors. This collaborative aspect creates 'communities of practice' that extend beyond the publication itself, with editorial boards, contributor networks, and reader communities forming overlapping circles of belonging that shape both content and cultural significance.[19] An increasingly fractured readership landscape has fueled the expanding appeal of indie periodicals in recent years, resulting in an 'explosion' of print. These publications serve as spaces for cultivating alternative cultures and building connections against mainstream norms and power structures. The bonds formed between creators and audiences allow for the mutual shaping of content and community identity.[20]

Periodicals carry a profound temporal dimension for groups united by shared histories and facilitate belonging that transcends temporal boundaries. Whether connecting soldiers who fought together or critics writing in post-war contexts, periodicals offer physical space in the present while serving as repositories of collective memory. They carry 'a certain formation of affective memory' that transports readers to a historical past.[21] They help us re-read and reinterpret that past. At the same time,

15 Marcin Markowicz in this issue.

16 Michel Frizot and Cédric de Veigy, *Vu: The Story of a Magazine That Made an Era* (Thames & Hudson, 2009), p. 19.

17 Marcin Markowicz in this issue.

18 Fionnuala Dillane, 'Forms of Affect, Relationality, and Periodical Encounters, or "Pine-Apple for the Million"', *Journal of European Periodical Studies*, 1.1 (2016), pp. 5–24 (p. 10). See Markowicz's discussion in this issue and his engagement with concepts in Dillane and Sara Ahmed, 'Affective Economies', *Social Text*, 22.2 (2004), pp. 117–39.

19 Jennifer Phegley, 'Collaboration in Victorian Periodical Production, Scholarship, and Teaching', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 54.2 (2021), pp. 173–99.

20 See Molina-Agudo in this issue.

21 Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photographs of Objects of Memory', in *Material Memories: Design and Evocation*, ed. by Marius Kwint, Jeremy Aynesley, and Christopher Breward (Berg, 1999), pp. 221–36 (p. 226).

belonging extends beyond nostalgic attachments to articulate collective aspirations and imagined futures. The modernist little magazines of the early twentieth century, for instance, did not merely document aesthetic innovations but actively constructed communities oriented toward potential futures, whether aesthetic, political, or social. Publishers understand that readers prefer gradual, almost imperceptible change; the sudden transformation from a soldier's newspaper to a revolutionary civilian publication, as described by Soenke Parpart in this issue, may have brought an equally sudden end to *Die Zeitung der 10. Armee [Newspaper of the 10th Army]*. Such cases demonstrate how periodicals' success in fostering belonging relies on maintaining coherent relationships *in time*.

Belonging to a Community of Readers

The relationship between editors and readers creates tensions between inclusion and exclusion in periodicals. Several articles in this issue focus on how periodicals served communities that were excluded from, or misrepresented in, mainstream publications,[22] showing how editors actively shaped communities through editorial decisions, creating 'proximities across space and time'.[23] These periodicals created 'self-organized collectives' through discourse circulation — sometimes in opposition to dominant power structures.[24] External factors such as funding, censorship, distribution networks, and political contexts affected content and community formation.

This dynamic between editors and readers continues in contemporary print culture, where readers still seek embodied engagement with the tactile, haptic qualities (and smells) of printed matter. This may be due to the ephemeral, fleeting, and impossible-to-pin-down nature of digital media, as well as the often overwhelming information overload in online spaces. Many contemporary periodicals are produced by art and design creatives, cultural and activist collectives as well as queer communities and climate activists, echoing the DIY ethos of historical publications while addressing distinctly contemporary concerns. In fact, print is far from dead. Periodicals continue to provide spaces for identity expression and community formation, characterized by 'their publishing structure, their close connections to their audiences, and their link to subcultures, milieus, or tribes'.[25]

Such ideas, emotions, declarations, and imaginings of belonging or not belonging manifest themselves widely in relation to periodical production and reception. Belonging operates simultaneously at multiple scales — from family and local culture to national, regional, and global communities, encompassing diasporic groups and diverse cultural and political affiliations. This multilayered nature reveals how periodicals function as nodes within intersecting networks of affiliation and identity. The varied forms of belonging in periodical cultures extend beyond content to encompass the complex networks of readers, journalists, editors, and activists who participate in these communities of print. Periodicals, as objects, transcend national boundaries, while their readers can remain rooted in local contexts. Diaspora periodicals, for instance, facilitate multiple overlapping belongings — to homeland, host country, and transnational communities — challenging simplistic understandings of identity and affiliation.

22 For example gay communities (Markowicz), revolutionary soldiers (Parpart), diasporic groups (Mansanti), and non-elite cultural groups.

23 See Markowicz in this issue.

24 See the article by Parpart in this issue and his discussion of Michael Warner's 'publics' and 'counterpublics' concept in 'Publics and Counterpublics', *Public Culture*, 14.1 (2002), pp. 49–90.

25 Fazli, Scheiding, and Anderson, 'Independent Magazines Today', p 5.

Periodical Studies and the Future

The field of periodical studies has itself been shaped by dynamics of belonging and exclusion. Scholarly attention has often privileged certain types of periodicals — particularly those associated with literature, modernism, and the avant-garde — while overlooking others. There has been a heavy emphasis on English-language publications. The Western avant-garde 'little' magazines, for example, have been subject to scholarly productivity, as have studies in feminist periodicals, while less attention has been paid to belonging in mainstream periodical cultures.[26] Recently, however, we have seen growing engagement with indie magazines, regional newspapers and periodicals produced by marginalized communities and cultures. The resulting 'silos' in periodical studies reflect the exclusionary practices and hierarchies of the broader world.

Yet periodicals, by their very nature, resist disciplinary containment. As material artefacts that combine literary, visual, commercial, and political qualities, they demand interdisciplinary approaches. The rich diversity of methodologies in periodical studies — from literary analysis and visual culture to digital humanities and sociological approaches — demonstrates the field's potential to become a space where disciplinary boundaries dissolve. In this sense, periodical studies offer a model for scholarly belonging that embraces interdisciplinarity rather than enforcing rigid boundaries.

This interdisciplinary potential is increasingly being realized by scholars across career stages who bring insights from postcolonial studies, sociology, histories of girlhood, literary studies, linguistics, media studies, media archaeology, archival studies, machine reading, discourse analysis, and content analysis to their work. Such methodological diversity challenges any notion that periodical scholars must belong to a single discipline. As our field continues to evolve, developing inclusive approaches that attend to the full range of periodicals that have shaped our cultural and political lives remains essential.

Periodical and Belongings: This Issue

Each of the six articles in this Special Issue explores how different periodicals created, facilitated, or transformed communities among readers, revealing the multifaceted ways periodicals foster belonging through shared discourse across diverse historical and geographical contexts. The studies examine regimental journals building *esprit de corps* among British soldiers, publications creating vital connections for Canada's LGBTQ+ community, trench journals transforming German soldiers into revolutionary agents, and post-Franco Spanish publications enabling political expression after dictatorship. The articles demonstrate how periodicals bring together 'interpretive communities' of readers — whether nationalistic, military, diasporic, professional, revolutionary, or marginalized — while simultaneously excluding others. They promote belonging through shared interests (trades, professions, lifestyles, beliefs) and through geographical 'imagined' communities spanning local, regional, national, and transnational scales. Throughout these studies, the complex relationship between mainstream and alternative publications illuminates how periodicals both challenge and reinforce boundaries of inclusion, sometimes reproducing the very exclusionary practices they ostensibly oppose. Online periodicals and journals — like this one you are reading — continue this tradition, bringing together readers with shared interests and values to create community and belonging.[27]

26 Fashion magazines, for example, or the middlebrow publications examined by Céline Mansanti in this issue.

27 Stanley Eugene Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Harvard University Press, 1980); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 2006).

Institutional and professional belonging is examined in Beth Gaskell's study of nineteenth-century military periodicals and Stefano Locati's analysis of post-war Italian film criticism. The very phrase *esprit de corps*, commonly applied to belonging more generally, is examined in its original sense by Gaskell. She reveals that creating community identity was essential to military operations, enabling individual soldiers to operate more effectively as one body or corps, while encouraging them to feel part of an alternative family unit. Gaskell shows how periodicals played an essential part in the process, although comforting cohesion could become pressure to conform and maintain discipline.

Stefano Locati's analysis of how Italian film critics presented themselves after the Second World War reveals an *esprit de corps* that fell apart when the Cold War began. Many critics rewrote their personal and professional histories to distance themselves from the fascist past while taking for granted that their periodicals would naturally exclude women from the role of critic. They seemed to agree that Italian cinema should be distinctive — belonging to the specific time of post-war reconstruction and place of Italy — their opposing political affiliations ultimately overrode their professional identity as film critics.

Periodicals promoting belonging to a particular place are often seen as insular, narrow, and exclusionary. But that is not inevitable. Céline Mansanti explores how three English-language periodicals in Paris during the First World War and post-war period offered a sense of belonging to different diasporic communities. Whether addressing soldiers (*Franco-American Eagle*), tourists (*Jazz*), or expatriates (*British Colony Magazine*), these publications used Paris — its history, culture, and myths — as a powerful common reference point that united diverse readers.

Resistance and alternative communities are the focus of the remaining studies. Soenke Parpart examines a crucial transition point when *Die Zeitung der 10. Armee*, the most widely circulated German trench journal on the Eastern Front, changed course post-war into a publication supporting the new revolutionary state. This dramatic change illustrates what Parpart calls 'the role the medium itself, and the relationships engendered by it, play in the formation and transformation of collective political subjects'.

Inés Molina-Agudo examines *Bananas*, a magazine published by a group of young people in Valencia after the end of Franco's government, while Marcin Markowicz considers *The Body Politic*, Canada's first gay liberation newspaper. Both magazines participated in the inclusive and alternative *esprit du temps* of their respective eras, and these geographically separated case studies demonstrate the importance of political activism as a cohesive factor for readership. Periodicals such as *Bananas*, through their very existence, demonstrated another possible order for a society based on mutual support, solidarity, and creative freedom. Publishing a periodical not only reflects existing communities but actively creates them through shared production and distribution networks. As one activist involved in *The Body Politic* observed, the magazine's impact 'depended on the reader's sense of belonging to a real community of people' who cared and could be 'fuelled by the sense of belonging, shared struggle, and collective responsibility'.

By centering the concept of belonging in our analysis of periodicals — while remaining attentive to its complexities and contradictions — we want to open new possibilities for understanding how these publications have constructed, maintained and sometimes challenged communities across time and space. In our increasingly fragmented world, understanding and cultivating belonging have become essential for human wellbeing and resilience. The articles in this special issue represent important steps toward a more nuanced understanding of periodicals as sites where belonging is negotiated, performed, and contested.

The dynamics of belonging explored in historical periodicals find striking parallels in today's polarized sociopolitical and media landscape. Digital communities and contemporary online publications often function similarly to historical periodicals in creating groups defined both by internal solidarity (affinity) and external antagonism. The fragmentation of the public sphere into discrete opinion bubbles recalls the specialized periodical communities of the past, though now operating at unprecedented scale and speed. Understanding the historical role of periodicals in fostering belonging offers valuable insights into current challenges of polarization and social fragmentation. More positively, digitization projects are giving historical periodicals new life and audiences, transcending temporal and geographical boundaries.

Beyond the topics mentioned above, we hope future research in this area might inquire into less examined aspects of belonging, including how periodicals police boundaries and enforce stereotypes, the role of belonging in periodical marketing and advertising, and the significance of labor relations in periodical production. As Achille Mbembe reminds us, questions of belonging remain urgent: who belongs where, and what do concepts of 'here' and 'there' truly mean?[28] These fundamental questions of inclusion and exclusion continue to shape both historical periodical studies and contemporary media landscapes.

Mary Ikoniadou is a Senior Lecturer at the Leeds School of Arts, where she co-directs the PARTICIPATE Design for Equity, Mobility & Agency research cluster. Her research lies at the intersection of visual culture, design history, and periodical studies, focusing on illustrated periodicals as spaces of belonging during the Cold War and in post-war Greek tourism promotion. She serves as secretary of the European Society for Periodical Research (ESPRit) and Editorial Board member for the *Journal of Periodical Studies*. She has held fellowships at the British School at Athens, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, and Jan van Eyck Akademie, with publications in the *Journal of Design History* (2022), Humanities (2020), Manchester University Press (2022), and Routledge (2017).

Annemarie McAllister is an independent scholar and honorary Fellow at the University of Central Lancashire, specializing in the cultural and social history of the UK temperance movement. She has written widely on temperance periodicals, including a chapter in *The Routledge Handbook to Nineteenth Century British Periodicals and Newspapers* (2016). Her latest book, *Writing for Social Change in Temperance Periodicals: Conviction and Career* (2023), locates them in networks of social change publications and shows such titles' importance to wider cultural, social, and literary developments. She has been associated with ESPRit since its inception in 2009, and was recently elected a member of the Board of RSVP.

Andrew Hobbs is an honorary senior lecturer in journalism at the University of Central Lancashire and a former journalist. He studies local and regional newspapers and magazines and sense of place. His open-access book *A Fleet Street in Every Town: The Provincial Press in England, 1855–1900* (Open Book, 2018) won the 2019 Colby book prize from the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals.