

Digital Strategy and Replica Editions

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Today, most print publishers complement their ink-and-paper versions with digital editions of one type or another. Some, however, have not done so. Reasons for this include unfamiliarity with the necessary technology, concern about costs, or simply not knowing where to start. But the absence of a digital edition can make a publication seem antiquated and out of step with prevailing media norms — a negative association that harms a brand and over time could erode its subscription base.

Before focusing specifically on digital editions, it's worth noting that most publishing consultants advocate a multiplatform model: 1) print 2) an online magazine or portal 3) an app available via digital newsstands.

The big three digital newsstands are Apple, which typically represents 75 to 80 percent market share; Amazon, which accounts for 10 or 15 percent; and Google, at 3 to 5 percent. The remainder is occupied by Zinio and various smaller companies.

Given its dominant footprint, Apple is an essential destination. It's important to mention that, with the launch of iOS 9 in September, Apple introduced News, an app that replaced Newsstand. Newsstand is now a folder for existing newspaper and magazine apps, which are available through the App Store. News uses RSS feeds to pull together stories from different publishers in a magazine-style layout. (Details can be found **here** (<https://support.apple.com/en-us/HT202329>), **here** (<http://www.macworld.com/article/2984560/ios/how-to-get-started-with-apple-news-ios-9s-newsstand-replacement.html>), and **here** (<http://9to5mac.com/2015/06/08/apple-news-ios/>).

On the web side, some publishers opt for online magazines, others for online portals. Although consumers tend to identify any website that bears a magazine's name as an online magazine, there are important differences in content and, perhaps most notably, the amount of time readers spend there.

At a true magazine website — one that models the linear magazine experience of print — an issue is posted as its own self-contained entity, and a reader might spend as much as 20 to 40 minutes there. By contrast, visitors to a magazine-branded portal — which usually contains some magazine content, but is dominated by ongoing blog-type posts of varying lengths, replete with hyperlinks to other content — might spend as little as two or three minutes.

Unlike magazine readers, who often read in depth, as they do with print, portal users tend to be surfing, searching, or following social media. As a result, they often bounce in read, read a few pages of content, and bounce out again. When done well — think **New York** (<http://nymag.com>) or **The Atlantic** (<http://www.theatlantic.com>) — portals achieve the harder-than-it-sounds trick of both distilling and extending brands at the same time. But they require significant investment in staff and technology, and therefore may be prohibitive for smaller publishers.

For these and other reasons, a full multiplatform strategy may be impractical. But some digital version, even a basic replication of the print book, is expected today, especially as increasing numbers of readers seek to complement — if not replace — their print magazines with digital. Beyond the convenience factor related to ever-accelerating migration of content to mobile devices, many people cite the green factor — a desire to reduce their environmental impact — as an incentive to embrace digital.

According to the digital publishing consulting firm **Mequoda** (<http://www.mequoda.com/advice/>), there are as many as **80 million U.S. digital magazine readers and subscribers in the United States** (<http://www.mequoda.com/articles/digital-magazine-publishing/digital-magazine-circulation/>). Whatever the focus of your publication, that's an enticing potential market to tap into — even if all you can deliver at the moment is a replica edition.

Digital editions also provide a cost-effective means of expanding your brand internationally without exorbitant manufacturing, shipping, and postage costs. Beyond the marketing benefit, there is economic opportunity: more readers can translate into higher rates for subscriptions and advertising, and thereby greater revenue.

In addition, there is a revenue opportunity beyond advertising: some publications with digital editions report higher renewal rates, and at higher prices due to bundled pricing if subscribers wish to receive both print and digital editions.

To create a replica edition, print content is digitized and presented in exactly the same manner as the print edition. This is achieved by uploading PDF files of the pages into software, which publishers can do themselves if staff permits, or can be done for them by numerous companies (including **Magazine+** (<https://www.magplus.com>), **GTxcel** (<http://www.gtxcel.com>), and **Nxtbook** (<http://www.nxtbookmedia.com>). In addition to replication, companies like these offer hosting, marketing, and analytics services, if desired.

Replica editions are the most affordable solution, but they have limitations. One big one: the user experience is nothing to crow about. Because the page is simply minimized to fit into a tablet or mobile screen, the type is too small for many people to read easily. Enlarging the view expands the page beyond the boundaries of the screen, requiring the reader to move the page around with a finger to see it all.

Text that reflows to fit the mobile screen and allows for easy vertical scrolling is far preferable to most readers, but costs more — sometimes as much as \$50 per page. According to Mequoda, a basic replica edition can cost approximately \$7,200 per year for a company like Mag+, and another \$2,000-\$3,000 in labor. Over time, this can be offset — and in many cases recouped — by selling digital subscriptions.

Although the viewing experience and features are limited, a digital replica is better than no digital edition at all. In the short run, that is enough for some readers. Though far from all — as interactive features like audio, video, and photo galleries become more prevalent in digital publications, more consumers will come to expect them.

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