

By Peter Koontz

A DIGNIFIED

In 2017, David Remnick of *The New Yorker* remarked that Condé Nast was in “a dignified state of panic,” driven by the need to adapt to an industry with “constantly pivoting digital realities” that required it to operate with low margins, resulting in smaller staffs and spaces, and titles being sold or ended. In 2019, the magazine industry continued to operate in this state. The year saw some publishers close down or sell off long-lived titles, others tried creative adaptation in an effort to survive, while still others bravely entered the field with fresh ideas.

Among the titles that ceased in 2019 are *ESPN: The Magazine*, *Family Circle*, and *Mad Magazine*—the demise of the latter a blow to the nostalgia of those who grew up loving the tri-fold back cover. TEN Publishing shut down 19 of its 22 automotive titles, while F+W Media filed for bankruptcy and saw its magazine portfolio of 50 titles (including *Writer’s Digest* and *Popular Woodworking*) sliced up and sold to several buyers.

Entertainment Weekly, on the other hand, pivoted. It announced a “reimagining” of its magazine, moving from a weekly to a monthly publication schedule, though it kept “*Weekly*” in its title. It changed editors at the same time.

Operating with lower profit margins may be the industry

norm, but Erin O’Mara, president of *The Nation*, sounds a warning to those who see cost cutting as the primary path to financial health. To those looking to shrink to survive, she says that “[w]e know that austerity doesn’t work,” and suggests that publishers look to the long-term when balancing potential expenses with potential returns.

Reducing costs while maintaining, or even improving, quality is a tricky business. Many publishers have attempted this feat through a number of changes, from reducing the frequency of print issues to highlighting their web presence with unique content. A focus on branding may lead publishers into fresh creative areas with the potential to bring in new readers.

Ultimately, publishers look to attract and keep readers who connect with their content. Often this connection results from very narrow or niche subject coverage. This is the case with several of the best new titles of 2019. They focus on female skateboarding culture, the Philadelphia art world, the renaissance of psychedelics, and Scandinavian architecture and design. The energy and creativity of the people involved in bringing these new titles to print is impressive—and, given the realities of the industry, more than a little bit brave.

Ark Journal. bi-a. \$29/Issue. Ed: Meete Barfod. ark-journal.com

Ark Journal, published in large format and 240 pages thick, feels substantial in the hand. Its goal is to explore “the spaces around us, the objects we put in them, and the people who make them.” Once engaged with its content, a reader becomes immersed in the visual experience, presented through photographs that illustrate creative and interesting uses of space. *Ark*, based in Copenhagen, seeks to explore “how a place can be a reflection

of the artist.” Its focus is on architecture and the underlying philosophies that reflect Scandinavian “values and aesthetics.”

Day + Night. a. \$10/issue. Eds: Josef Reyes, Leonor Mamanna. dayplusnight.net

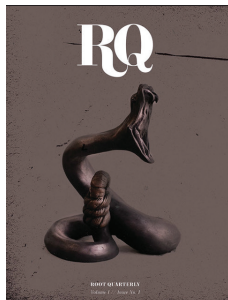
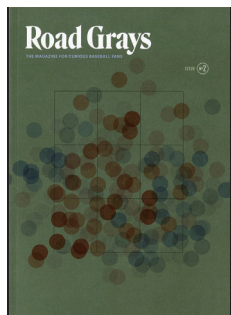
Day + Night is unique in both format and content. On first—and second—glance, this magazine can be mistaken for an audio cassette, as it is shipped in the plastic hinged case familiar to music lovers of a certain age. Inside the inaugural issue are “fourteen notes for a New York City mixtape.” Created by 13 authors and one photographer, these are heavy on personal remembrance and short on musical criticism. Much of the interest in this maga-

zine is the strange format, but the eclectic take on music from Bach to Laura Mvula proves this is more than an oddity. Read with Spotify at hand for the full experience.

Double Blind. bi-a. \$12/issue. Eds: Shelby Hartman, Madison Margolin. doubleblindmag.com

Double Blind is a quality initiative that seeks to lead the “psychedelic renaissance” into an “equitable, inclusive and conscious future.” Far from a tribute to the drug culture, *Blind* presents a professional approach that often references randomized, double-blind clinical studies to suggest psychedelics can improve some lives.

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STATE OF PANIC

Among the topics covered are the racial inequities of psychedelic trials; how the idea of “awe” can help develop a proper perspective to fight climate change; turning 70 (a poem); and the thoughts of a mushroom forager. The editors insist that “psychedelics are good journalism,” and the inaugural issue makes a strong case to support this claim.

Knowable Magazine. q. Free. Ed: Eva Emerson. knowablemagazine.org

Published by Annual Reviews, *Knowable* is a print outgrowth of its website, presenting a quarterly sampling of its digital content. The publisher embraces the open science movement, and the magazine is its attempt to bring current scientific knowledge and its broader relevance to the general reader. It is visually appealing, and presents topics in a “Q&A” format with relevant experts. It covers a wide range of fields in the sciences and social sciences.

Luckbox. 10/year. \$39.99. Ed: Ed McKinley. luckboxmagazine.com

A luckbox is one who finds good fortune, not as a result of close study or intelligent planning, but through good old-fashioned dumb luck. To improve its readers’ odds and lessen their reliance on smiling fortune, *Luckbox* sets out to improve decision-making by demonstrating how to view the world “through the lens of probability.” Articles on investing strategies, analyses of individual stocks, and trending products dominate the content; however, it is much more than a magazine for investors. Discussions on media, entertainment, artificial intelligence, and other current and popular topics are included, presented in a format that is colorful and heavily illustrated.

OH-SO. s-a. \$16/issue. Ed: Austin Stahl. oh-so.co

Some new magazines thrill us with their unique visions, and that is the case with *OH-SO*, a magazine inspired when the founder’s daughter took up skateboarding and quickly encountered a decidedly male-dominated culture. In response, *OH-SO* set out to celebrate “the global female skateboarding scene.” The magazine is high quality all around, from the paper used to the photography to the layout to the content. There is little that compares with this look into a subculture which is so nicely realized in both print and online.

Road Grays: The Magazine for Curious Baseball Fans. s-a. \$12/issue. Ed: Austin Stahl. roadgraysmag.com

Road Grays is obviously a labor of love, but a smart one. As described in the inaugural issue, the editor set out to create a different sort of baseball magazine, one that embraces the famed sports writer Roger Angell’s thought that “baseball is the writer’s game.” The magazine stirs nostalgia, covering players and issues that span the long history of the game. It addresses current issues with a unique perspective, such as an article on merchandizing surrounding the controversial Cleveland Indian mascot and an interview with the Luxury Suite Concierge at Oracle Park in San Francisco.

RQ: Root Quarterly. q. \$38. Ed: Heather Shayne Blakeslee. rootquarterly.com

Subtitled “Art & Ideas from Philadelphia,” *RQ* is a slim (48 pages) magazine that is a joy to leaf through—and read. It is heavily illustrated, with a mix of photographs, drawings, and comic panels, and it makes

creative use of typography. The content includes an eclectic mix of essays, fiction, interviews, reviews, and recipes, making for a strong new title.

The Spectator (U.S. Edition). m. \$95.88. Ed: Freddy Gray. spectator.us

Not many publications take 189 years to consider the wisdom of a spinoff, but that is exactly what *The Spectator* did in 2019. The U.S. edition is glossier and thicker (by some 20 pages) than its UK progenitor, but it follows a format that will feel familiar to readers of the original. There is a generous section on “Books & Arts” and a second covering “Life,” which, among other topics, asks who misses smoking in bars. Feature articles in the inaugural issue explore the causes of American anger, social media and democracy, and big porn. An all-round interesting and quality magazine from a group who should know what they are doing—and show it.

The Unseasonal. s-a. \$24/issue. Ed: Ger Ger. theunseasonal.com

At 272 pages, the inaugural issue of *The Unseasonal* (labeled ‘Prelude’) is hefty. It positions itself to be “a special projects magazine” that provides “an alternative take on the fashion industry and the art world.” The magazine is heavily illustrated with a mixture of black and white and color photography. The flavor of its content is evident from the first article, “Horses and I.” This 19-page article explores the artist Nick Turner’s evolving use of the “energy and idea of the horse” in this work, combining his photographs, journal entries, and interview excerpts. The style of this magazine is unhurried and allows a unique and inspiring take on the subjects it covers. ■

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