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Follow the Worker, Not the Work: Hard Lessons from Failed London Music Hall Magazines

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**Follow the Worker, not the Work:
Hard lessons from failed London music hall magazines**

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Abstract

London's music hall stages and the variety entertainment that flourished there at the turn of the 20th century gave rise to a raft of magazines hopeful of gaining an audience from fans and/or performers and theater managers. Some flourished for a time, but all died with the artform, unlike their American cousin, *Variety*, which still thrives nearly a century after its first issue. This article compares the founding missions of these magazines to that of *Variety* in search of guiding principles for magazine management, particularly of business publications, in industries undergoing rapid change. The conflict between two long-standing principles of magazine management—to adhere to the founding mission and to adapt to changing times—is resolved by offering a new principle: follow the worker, not the work, and let the most successful readers define the field through their actions.

Introduction

From 1720 to 1967, Great Britain's celebrated theater industry prompted the creation of 1,235 periodicals. Seven hundred and ninety-six of these were published in London. In the final decades of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th, the majority of new titles centered not on the so-called *legitimate* stage, but on the rowdier, bawdier, and, by some ways of reckoning, more popular variety stage, which tended, in England, to go under the not-quite-synonymous term of *music hall* entertainment.¹

Of these magazines devoted to the popular culture of their day, none survives. A very few enjoyed runs of several years before folding, but the vast majority were short-lived, including a disconcerting number that gave up after just a few issues. It is difficult for today's reader to see Music Hall and the magazines that covered it as anything more than an arcane, murky and obscure phenomenon, a minor footnote in cultural history. But Music Hall was no sideshow. Although it began in the middle of the 19th century as back-room barroom entertainment, it quickly grew to be the most popular, most attended form of entertainment in the western world, eclipsing the so-called legitimate stage in box office appeal if not in reputation. Again, the magnitude of this is difficult to comprehend, since these days no remnant of Music Hall remains, and the legitimate stage itself labors in the shadows of television, film and other electronic entertainments offering various forms of virtual reality. A century ago, electronic entertainment was just being invented. Virtually all entertainment was non-virtual. All popular entertainment was live. The world flocked to music hall stages seeking the same mix of diversion and inspiration it seeks today in a multitude of digital forms. The industry spurred the creation of a variety of magazines hopeful of riding its coattails. Not one survives.

Contrast this situation to that of these magazines' American cousin, *Variety*, a magazine that began covering the same entertainment phenomenon in New York in 1905 and thrives to this day as a chronicle of America's divergent forms of popular entertainment, from the live stage to recordings of various types to video game spin-offs.

What did *Variety* do right that dozens of London magazines, some of them with the same name, did wrong? One might say that it picked the right country, case closed. No one can deny that the United States has become the world's leading producer—and, to the dismay of some, exporter—of cultural products. Country of origin might well have played a role. But in 1905, London was equal to or greater than New York in cultural stature. And as the American *Variety* included news of Britain's music halls, the London magazines had correspondents in the new world and some of the magazines circulated in America and various other spots around the globe. Just as America's *Variety* moved its main offices from New York to Los Angeles to follow the shift in both the *zeitgeist* and the center of production of pop culture, London's magazines might have shifted their focus to follow the news and the market; they might have packed up and moved, too. They did not. "Why?" seems a legitimate question, not just for historians, but for scholars of media management who seek to isolate the root causes of success and failure in the magazine industry.

Perhaps one of the richest sources for material on the history of the stage in Great Britain, its theaters, plays, actors, managers, and influence, lies in the theatrical periodicals which have appeared in the last two-and-a-half centuries.²

So wrote Carl J. Stratman in the introduction to his exhaustive bibliography of two-and-a-half centuries of magazine publication. Stratman overlooked the fact, perhaps because it was so obvious, that magazines are also a rich source for the study of *magazines*. Most of these publications are held by the British Library, a branch of the British Museum, in its Newspaper Library in Colindale.³ Although he saw this repository as a valuable resource for scholars of the English theatre, Stratman made one observation of these theater magazines of particular interest to journalism scholars:

Many of the periodicals began with high editorial principals, with attempts to cover all aspects of dramatic activity, and with a vitality suggesting the expectation of many years of fruitful work ahead, yet they shortly had to bow to a lack of either material or of readers.⁴

Although consideration will be given here to causes other than lack of material or readers, this study shares Stratman's wonder at the sheer number of dreams gone awry. It is especially disturbing when one considers that the era of music hall magazines roughly coincided with what is generally considered to be the magazine industry's first golden age (the second being the 1990s). Identifying formulas for magazine failure might point the way to guidelines for magazine success, and thereby be of use to those who would plan start-ups in our time, particularly with business or b2b titles and with those crossover titles that attempt to attract both business and consumer readers.

Key Terms and Literature Review

The focus of this study, then, is on the music hall magazines of London. Two definitional questions must be resolved first, one involving the term “music hall,” and the other the issue of whether most of these titles should be considered business, consumer, or crossover. Some writers in these magazines made a distinction between the terms “music hall” and “variety.” The former sometimes referred literally to the theaters themselves, but came to represent the genre of entertainment that found its home there—the singing or playing on instruments of popular songs, tap and other forms of popular dancing, acrobatics, minstrel shows (often in blackface), transvestite acts, ventriloquism, magic, dog and pony acts, pantomime (or *panto*, a particularly English form), clown acts, comedy and comedic sketches. With the invention of the motion picture, variety shows came to include short films. The genre was roughly bounded by the legitimate theater and opera house on the high end and, on what might be called the low end, by vaudeville, burlesque, and the circus sideshow. The magazines covered in this study sprang up as a response to the new artform itself, and were acutely aware of the newness of it. One 1905 magazine pegged the dawn of variety at 50 years earlier, tracing its history from “...the small back parlour of a low public house to the majestic imperial palaces of to-day.”⁵ For the purposes of this study, a magazine was considered a music hall or variety magazine if it called itself that in its title, motto, or introductory letter to readers.⁶

The second definitional question involves the status of these magazines as business, consumer, or crossover. While that distinction is often a starting point for research, here it is a central concern of the study itself. Upon reading most of these magazines, one is not immediately clear on just what kind of audience they are trying to attract, especially when the advertising is taken into account. In their introductory letters to readers, many of these magazines appeared to be trying to gain a combined or crossover readership of agents, producers, performers, and fans. But how they actually slanted their publications—what they wrote about, where they positioned their professionally oriented advertisements—may say more about whom they were really targeting. Rather than limiting itself to one type or another, this study considers all types and pays special attention to their emerging orientations toward readers.

The author’s interest in Music Hall magazines springs directly from recent research conducted with a colleague on *Variety*. Fosdick and Cho (2003) used a content analysis of a sample of four years in the century-long run of *Variety* magazine and found a rapid progression of commercial orientation in the early years of that magazine. We found that while *Variety* appeared to share its readers’ distrust of the newly invented motion picture, it quickly expanded its coverage to include film and other new entertainment forms that came along. We found significant increases in the coverage of recorded entertainment and decreases in the coverage of live entertainment. We also established a marked increase in business orientation by 1937, forty years before the rise of business reporting in American newspapers. That study is the first of a projected series on *Variety*, leading to a history of the publication. The current study should provide context for that larger effort; the success of

Variety will be better understood when compared with the choices made and consequences felt by the London Music Hall magazines.

Soo Young Cho and I also observed that cultural studies tend to concentrate on non-artistic forms of culture, leaving little relevant literature for those studying arts journalism.⁷ *Variety* is a business magazine, so we also noted the general lack of scholarly work in the area of business or trade magazines, citing in particular the records of *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* and *The Journal of Magazine and New Media Research*: “No doubt in both cases this is due to the nature of the pool of submissions, and not to any editorial bias” (p. 3). Gerlach (1987) and Endres (1995) studied the problem, and offered a variety of explanations, the most interesting being Endres’ supposition that most magazine professors research the area of their own professional experience, and few come from business magazines.

In any case, this study builds on the work of Fosdick and Cho (2003), and finds no new relevant literature not cited there, apart from Stratman (1972), quoted above. Blanche M. Ganahl’s master’s thesis has a promising title, “The commercial theatre magazine in the United States from 1900 to 1958,” but her topic turns out to be not commercial magazines on theater, but magazines of the commercial theatre. Her account of the leading American consumer magazines for theater-goers is interesting, but not particularly relevant to this study. As Stratman suggested, most studies that rely on variety or music hall magazines do so in service of theatrical or literary fields, not journalistic ones; examples include Phillips (2002), Scott (2002), Beegan (2001), Pecastaing-Boissiere (2000), and Kehler (1998).

Theory and Method

My approach here is historical. One might expect, given the pop-culture subject matter of these magazines, that I would follow the lead of the *cultural* historian. That indeed might prove to be a logical and fruitful approach for future studies, as might *social* histories that examine the interaction of economics and class in the development of the music hall and the media that sprang up around it. Instead I offer an *intellectual* history. The dominant historical method of scholarly treatments of magazines has been based on the notion that magazine success stories can be traced to single, dynamic historical figures, the Henry Luces and Helen Gurley Browns of the world. The idea is that magazines do best when they are the product of one cohesive driving vision. That very much falls within the tradition of intellectual history, which looks for the currents of history in the recorded speeches and writings of thought leaders.⁸ Because of our subject matter, this study may feel more like cultural history; but in focusing on the ideas leading the publication, this is closer to intellectual history.

The early 20th century was a time when much journalism appeared without bylines, and some magazines did not even reveal the names of their editors or publishers. But that does not mean they sought success in the publishing world without a plan. Martha Stewart had not yet invented the art of personal branding, but these music hall magazines are full of

clues to their blueprints, not the least of which is the letter to the reader that often announced the founding editor's intentions (albeit often without a name attached). We will examine each magazine with an eye toward uncovering that founding vision, and then see how that vision was carried out and what fate held in store. A few of these magazines thrived for a time, but all died eventually. Looking at their hopeful beginnings with a knowledge of their ends in mind, we hope to see patterns emerge, and perhaps lessons for future makers of magazines.

The periodicals of the music hall era fall neatly into two categories: the many that lasted fewer than three full years, and the few that survived more than 20 years. None had life-spans of between three and 20 years. We will begin with a necessarily brief overview of the overnight flops and then turn to the long-running productions (to use the jargon these magazines attached to stage shows).

Overnight Flops

1885-1886, *Interlude*

1887-1888, *G.H. Ross's Variety Paper*

1888-1890, *The Playgoer*

1896-1897, *The Variety Stage*

1898-1898, *Variety*, continued as *Variety and Variety Critic*

1904-1905, *The Music Hall Pictorial and Variety Stage*

1905-1905, *The Variety Stage Illustrated*

1905-1905, *The Variety Stage and Music Hall Pictorial*

1905-1905, *The Variety Theatre*

The Newspaper Library in Colindale, on London's northern perimeter, contains most of the issues of all of the magazines listed above. It also holds several examples of what are called "registration issues." In British law and business at the turn of the 20th century, precedent was everything. The only way to establish the exclusive right to use a magazine title was to publish a copy before anyone else did. Publishers planning a new magazine had reason to worry that much of the planning and work that was necessary to a launch would be for naught if someone else came out with an identically-titled publication the week before theirs. So prudent publishers often printed a bare-bones issue of an as-yet undeveloped magazine, featuring the chosen title and thereby laying claim to it. Some publishers printed more than one title, giving them more options as they approached the true launch of their publication. Oftentimes titles were registered for magazines and never heard from again. It is a sign of the vitality of the music hall industry at the turn of the century—and of the idea that it could support magazines—that so many such titles were reserved in this manner. It continues to be an article of faith with many in the magazine industry that a good title is essential to success.

Begun in November of 1885, *Interlude* led on its cover with advertisements for music hall acts, and continued on inside pages with listings of performances and two full pages of professional cards—three-line ads touting the abilities of performers. Hence, though an

editor's note on page eight declared that it was offered to "members of the Variety profession and the general readers," it appears to have targeted the former most directly. Later in this piece, which was unsigned, two notes were struck that were to be echoed in many subsequent publications, the first being the idea that the field was now big enough to support a magazine of its own, and the second being that this magazine was it. Time and again, magazines would pretend to have been the first to think of covering the industry, and the first to recognize the true vitality of the Music Hall. But in 1885, the idea was still relatively new:

...hitherto no journal has fully represented the Variety profession, and yet it is very doubtful if the music-halls of Great Britain and Ireland are not patronized by larger numbers than the so-called 'legitimate' theatres.⁹

On pages nine and ten in that 16-page first issue, *Interlude* offered "Out West—Jottings from a Stroller's Notebook," reported from locations in Kansas and Colorado. The second issue, dated a week later, replaced the front-page advertisements with a story about "Variety Stars," and added a motto to the flag: "The Organ of the Variety Profession." By the time of the last issue the following May, that motto had changed to, "A theatrical, critical and sporting journal." There was no mention or explanation for the closing of the magazine.

A number of the periodicals that came and went at the end of the nineteenth century mixed music hall items with general interest editorial matter, much of it short and humorous. *G. H. Ross's Variety Paper* included bits and pieces of news, jokes, mini-reviews, and cartoon sketches. In fact, those features dominated the theatrical coverage. Under the title the magazine offered, "Fact, Fiction, Fashion, Folly, and Fancy." Perhaps music hall would have figured more prominently had it begun with the letter "f." A number of amusement papers not mentioned here led with humor and racing news, with limited coverage of music hall entertainments.

The Playgoer—whose artless motto was, "A Leaflet for Playgoers"—began in November, 1888, as a consumer magazine for those interested in the so-called legitimate stage. Its sights were set high at the start, as it announced it would not accept theater advertisements:

Absolute independence we shall assert at all times, and the proprietors of *The Playgoer* have indulged no hope of turning their venture to pecuniary account.... We have barred every approach by which our independence might be threatened.¹⁰

They were true to their word, including clothing store ads but none for theaters. We include this non-variety magazine here because of the peculiar promise it made in its final issue to return in two months as a weekly with a new mission to include the provinces and the music halls in its purview. Six years passed, however, before another issue of the title appeared, and that one only lasted 10 months.

The Variety Stage began on January 11, 1896, with an income stream largely dependent on performers advertising in hopes that managers read the publication. The publication took the unusual step of listing (alphabetically) all the performers who had advertised in the issue, under the title “Artiste’s Directory.”¹¹ Its issue one letter to the reader, under the title “Our Bow,” set out the bare bones of a mission statement, while making a distinction among key industry terms:

A few years ago, the term “Variety Stage” implied the Music Halls, pure and simple, but today it has a broader significance, and the “legitimate” is slowly losing the vast prominence accorded it long ago to the exclusion of lighter forms of amusement.¹²

The column went on to promise “facts, photos...philosophies...legal advice on all professional points...,” and that “Our criticisms will be just and impartial.” It concluded that the magazine was intended to be both for the public and a “class organ.” Its dominant editorial content in this and subsequent issues was profiles and tidbits of and on performers—of interest, therefore, to both fans and performers. It died quietly.

A number of publications began separately and merged, changed their names, and died under the weight of their lengthening flags. In what may have been a simple attempt to try out different titles, *The Variety Stage Illustrated* and *The Variety Stage and Music Hall Pictorial* found greater simplicity as they merged into *The Variety Theatre* early in 1905, several months before the birth of New York’s *Variety*. *The Variety Theatre* printed its advertisements in an outerwrap that surrounded the magazine proper, which began with a second front of editorial matter. A gossipy tone pervaded the many column of short items, many beginning with “We notice that...” or “We hear that...,” without ever saying who “we” are. Reviews, large-format photographs, and performer profiles filled most of the inner pages. Although it purported to be for both the public and the profession, most of the effort seemed to be aimed at the consumer. With every subscription, the magazine offered free seats to the reader’s choice of variety theaters.

In our time, *Esquire* magazine has generated buzz by having one celebrity interview another. *The Variety Theatre* might have invented the gimmick with its “Lightning Interviews” (an editor’s note called it a new idea).¹³ Although full of lively copy and studio photographs of the stars, *The Variety Theatre* breathed its last on January 5, 1906, with no mention that this would be the final issue. On the contrary, a two-part series ended with part one: “The Home of Variety—Leicester Square, Past and Present,” by “W.D.” (p. 191)¹⁴

A good concluding example of the “overnight flop” category of music hall magazines is London’s *Variety*, a penny paper begun on Saturday, February 12, 1898. A hodgepodge of racing items, professional cards and editorial matter full of hopeful observations about the industry. In “The Future of the Variety Stage,” one T. Murray Ford (whom a piece on the following page identifies as a recently fired editor of *The Encore*) wrote that “...of the making of Music Halls there is no end.” He went on to point out that the “legitimate stage” was housing several variety shows, “...and soon it must come about that there will be no

boundary line between the greater and lesser stages....So many artistes now-a-days drift from the legitimate stage to that of variety and back again..."¹⁵ It sounds like a preamble to a magazine that would bridge the gap between forms, but this periodical did no such thing. The English are masters at making distinctions between different classes of being, matter or activity, so it should not be surprising that they continued to observe the invisible dividing line between music hall and legitimate stages, not to mention the coming onslaught of electronic forms of delivery. This attitude may well have played a part in the willingness of these magazines to live or die in the service of the music hall.

Long runs

1889-1912, *The Music Hall and Theatre Review*

1892-1930, *The Encore*

1906-1957, *The Performer*

The Music Hall began on February 16, 1889, as a penny weekly with a front covered with advertisements. It sounded a common theme: "Our Programme" promised that the editors would do "the best we can" for public and profession, promising that the publication would be "a good means of bringing artistes under the notice of managers," and concluding, "We are quite certain that the music hall profession is of sufficient importance to support its own paper, and this publication is calculated to supply the want."¹⁶

While centering on the music hall, the magazine also included "Racing Notes" and advertisements for sporting goods such as bicycles along with ads for professional performers. By the time of its last issue, in 1912, it had expanded and merged to such an extent that its title had become *The Music Hall and Theatre Review*, "with which is incorporated *The Showman*."

The most unusual aspect of *The Music Hall* was the manner in which it closed. Unlike most dying publications of the time, which exited without a curtain speech, or those few that explained their troubles and said farewell, this magazine published the following in a two-column box:

The Music Hall and Theatre Review has been acquired by Mr. Robert Taylor, of International Shows Limited, 178, Charing Cross Road, by whom it will be carried on in future in a greatly improved form; and to whom all accounts due up to and from August 29th issue are payable.

Either Mr. Taylor found the publication to be too difficult a proposition, or the announcement had been made only in the hopes that delinquent advertisers from the profession would be more likely to pay their outstanding bills if they felt the publication would still be around and in a position to affect their business for good or ill. In any case, *The Music Hall* managed to have a longer run than most London music hall publications of the day but did not stray far from the standard formula.

The Encore, 1892-1930

The Encore appears to have been the most broadly conceived magazine of the niche. Calling itself “A Music Hall and Theatrical Review,” this penny weekly included along with its variety stage coverage columns on classical music, art galleries, and the legitimate stage. Its first issue on November 11, 1892, led with editorial text, but by week two it was devoting its front to performer’s cards. The British Library’s copy of that first issue was incomplete, and included no introductory letter to the reader. Over its thirty-seven year lifetime, *The Encore* maintained a mix of insider and consumer content, but featured most prominently the advertisements by performers. Hence, it seemed to promise to the talent side of industry that the business side was paying attention.

The Encore must have done a good job of maintaining that trust, as it carried on gamely until the great depression hit. By 1930, its front page of performers’ cards (now including photographs) often included spots blank but for the words, “This space to let.” It closed out its run in January of 1930 full of indications of bleak economic times, but still peppered with news items about the business.

The Performer, 1906-1957

In terms of longevity, *The Performer* was the most successful of the London music hall magazines, and demands the most attention. No doubt it owed some of its stability over half a century to its status as a union publication, which it announced on page one of the first issue: “The official organ of The Variety Artistes Federation, The Music Hall Artistes Railway Association, The English Section of the International Artistes Lodge & various music hall societies.” This was followed by the slogan, “The greatest enemy to freedom is not the tyrant but the contented slave.”¹⁷

That first issue also included a free insurance coupon valid for one week and covering death due to accidents on trains, buses or trams. “Our Policy,” on page five of the first issue, made clear its intention to defend the rights of the music hall worker: “In all things fair. To everyone just. To all defence. To opponents courteous. To friends appreciative. To right the wrong. To protect the weak. To assist all. To malign none.” This was followed by “The Overture,” which read, in part:

It is the artiste’s own paper, since every member who joins the Federation will be a part proprietor of the journal, and as such it should receive the hearty and constant support of everyone whose means of livelihood is on the music-hall stage.

This was followed by a list of grievances, including shoddy dressing rooms, lack of music halls in garrison towns, and, most vociferously, the “barring clause” that appeared in the contracts of music hall managers were requiring performers to sign. This clause prohibited performers from appearing anywhere else during the period of the contract. *The Performer* and the associations it represented sought to alter that clause to allow performers to

work at venues a given distance away, and thereby increase their opportunities to earn money. Indeed, within a few months of inception, the magazine led a strike against the barring clause.

Other music hall magazines offered workers a place to advertise and news of opportunities; they helped talent make itself known to management. *The Performer*, on the other hand, in concert with its sponsoring unions, sought to improve working conditions, and served as a rallying place for dissent. It was the voice of the common worker. While other magazines aimed to attract the general public and the managers of the music halls in addition to the performers, *The Performer* appears to have taken its title quite seriously, and kept its mission focused.

Why it thrived and why it died both seem clear. It thrived because it knew what it was and whom it served, and never lost the trust of the average music hall worker. It died because it adhered to its founding mission with a vengeance. Unlike most of its sisters, the last of the music hall magazines went out with a public and rather angry swansong. The final issue included a number of farewells, including a final column by George Le Roy, Press Officer and Deputy Treasurer of the Variety Artistes' Federation:

A glance through the pages of the early volumes brings to mind the wealth of talent which peopled the world of entertainment. Names of stars, *who were stars* [Le Roy's italics] before the use of that word meant someone had sung a number that sold so many thousand gramophone records, names of small-time pro's who managed to work fairly frequently, and although they did not "top" were performers of solid ability.¹⁸

Ironically, if one follows Le Roy's lead and glances through those early volumes of *The Performer*, one will find the very first page of the first issue dominated by an advertisement for The Gramophone, an advertisement listing 20 artistes who have made gramophone records. This being 1906, surely some of these artistes had spent time on music hall stages, and were most likely members of the union that sponsored the magazine. They were men and women of parts, interested in working wherever their talents found recompense. Whether performing pantos on stage or toiling in front of a succession of new recording devices, they were performers. The magazine might have defined itself to cover the worker wherever he worked. The union might have, too. After all, the Teamsters Union did not disappear when drivers exchanged horses for motorized trucks. The Variety Artistes' Federation might have continued to serve the dwindling numbers of music hall performers while also serving those who followed the money into other forms. Instead it wound up pointing fingers at those few remaining headliners. LeRoy continued, "...if some of our prominent performers had taken a greater interest in their official organ, my song would be to a different theme and the Organ would have continued to play."

Later in that final issue, columnist Ted Moreland wrote:

The death of this old paper is due entirely to the lack of support from those it has always tried to help. Regretfully, I number many personal friends among them, people who have avidly accepted free mentions but have ignored the fact that no paper can live without income. There is nothing to the credit of Variety folk that this day sees the end of a long run and in the death of *The Performer* lies a warning to the individual as well as the business as a whole.¹⁹

The passing of *The Performer* received brief mention in *The Times*, in a one-and-one-half inch item buried on page six.²⁰ A week later, a review “From our dramatic critic” of a rare Variety show made reference to the magazine:

The constant murmur that the music hall is dying was given fair confirmation last week, when *The Performer*—for over half a century the official organ of the variety profession—ceased publication. Mr. Don Ross’s *Thanks for the Memory*, however, gives us an opportunity to see one or two artists who were drawing audiences long before *The Performer* was founded, and who still display some of the old qualities of the music hall.²¹

The review went on to detail the turns of Miss Hetty King, a veteran of more than 60 years, and her “male impersonations” of lechers and drunks, and “Mr. G. H. Elliott, the chocolate-colored coon,” who sang and performed soft-shoe tap. Clearly, the music hall was on its last legs when *The Performer* let out its final bitter breath. It had devoted itself to a particular segment of the entertainment industry, and thrived so long as that segment thrived, and no longer.

Discussion

What lessons can be drawn from these magazines of a by-gone era? We have concentrated on the missions of these music hall magazines, both stated and implied. We have also made reference to the happier progress of America’s *Variety*. To establish that comparison, we must now look at *Variety*’s mission. Fosdick and Cho (2003) summed it up thusly:

As a trade publication from the start—“A Variety Paper for Variety People”—it has never lost sight of the bottom line.²² While consumer publications championed this or that movement or fad in the arts, *Variety*’s mission was to follow what sells.

That tag-line demands examination: “A Variety Paper for Variety People.” Most of the London publications saw themselves as being committed to the *industry*. Some of them, particularly *The Performer*, were committed to the common worker *in* the industry. But so long as that industry was bounded by the Music Hall and its fantastic but perishable traditions, those magazines had tied their carts to a horse that would eventually die in its

tracks. Certainly flexibility in keeping up with fashion has long been recognized as key to magazine survival. But so has sticking to one's mission.

So what we have here is a conflict in values: On the one hand, editors are urged to adhere to their founding missions; on the other hand, they are urged to change with the times. What is needed is a guiding principle that helps magazine management decide when to stand fast and when to shift focus. This study strongly suggests just such a principle: Follow the worker, not the work.

This means more than simply keeping abreast of worker interests. Consumer publications are different: they can survive by nourishing the fantasies and illusions of readers who buy the magazine to enjoy a brief vacation from hard realities. Similarly, the readers of business publications may maintain a sentimental attachment to a dying segment of the industry long after it has ceased to be a significant percentage of their income. But b2b editors nourish those sentiments at their peril. Successful editors need to do more than reflect the interests declared by readers in surveys and focus groups. If a b2b magazine's primary value lies in helping its readers make money, it should pay attention to where its most successful readers are finding work.

Variety appears to have done that in a century of being a magazine for "Variety people." And *The Performer* appears *not* to have done that in its decades of serving music hall workers. Both publications served the worker, but they defined the worker differently. *The Performer* defined a music hall worker, simply enough, as someone who works in a music hall. *Variety's* definition was more nuanced: A variety worker was defined by his or her skills, not by the mode of transmission of those skills. So when a variety worker stepped off the variety stage and into a recording studio, he or she remained a variety worker, and the publication followed whatever developments affected that worker's prospects for success.

Early on, *Variety* expressed some concern—one might even call it fear—at the potential for the young film industry to compete with live popular entertainment. Certainly there was economic reason to distrust this new delivery system: If one performance could be filmed and copied and shown over and over worldwide, then only one set of performers would be paid, and they would only get paid once. That had the potential for putting thousands upon thousands of performers out of work. And in fact that no doubt happened. One might say that *The Performer* took the noble route, standing up for an industry to its dying breath. And there may be other industries in times to come for which editors will feel an admirable commitment to a particular niche that overshadows their desire for profit.

But the argument could be made that this is a decision best left to the worker served by the magazine. *Variety* did not force performers to abandon the stage. On the contrary, it has continued to cover live performances for close to a century now. Variety performers have always been a flexible lot (especially, but not exclusively, the acrobats). Today's performer might appear on a stage one night and record lines for video games the next day, all the while saving money and lining up backers for his or her own independent record label. Such a performer needs information on several parts of the entertainment industry. Such a

performer might, when surveyed, identify him- or herself with just one segment of the industry: “I’m a stage actor,” or, “I’m a tragedian.” If our principle holds, though, business magazines should pay less attention to attitudes and how readers define themselves and more attention to where they actually earn money.

Let us rephrase this principle in operational terms: When the industry your magazine covers begins to change or even to die, go where the successful worker goes. Some music hall performers never did anything but music hall work on music hall stages; they worked less and less as the 20th century progressed. But the most successful variety performers—people like Bob Hope—glided from vaudeville to radio to film to television. Thousands of lesser Bob Hopes, the bit players, followed the same pattern, working where there was work to be had. Unsuccessful magazines saw them as workers who kept changing careers (and moving *out* of the target audience). *Variety* succeeded because it defined its readers by income stream. To put the principle in negative terms: Don’t make limiting distinctions not supported by industry demographics.

One more, smaller lesson might be drawn from considering the history of these magazines: It doesn’t appear to be necessary to change the title every time the scope of the publication changes. Many of the overnight flops underwent repeated name changes in their short lives. *The Encore*, *The Performer*, and *Variety* all stuck with one name. One might think that *Variety*, in particular, would have been tempted to abandon such an arcane name. Perhaps it would have, had it been a consumer publication. Paradoxically, while it was the one publication that most closely mirrored changes in the entertainment industry, it has always been slow to adopt advances in design and headline writing. But it kept its eye on the ball—the same ball its readers were playing with—and thrived.

Future research will look at other reasons for the success of *Variety*. In the pursuit of the “follow the worker” principle, we might have underestimated the influence of American cultural values on the development of *Variety*. Yes, *Variety* was fortunate to be physically closer to the westward expansion of popular culture. But there may be more to it. What drives innovation in popular culture? America is often criticized for its ephemeral tastes, its lack of respect for tradition, its love of the faddish and new. The English, on the other hand, famously love their many traditions. Perhaps the same underlying cultural value that led America to embrace innovative new entertainments also affected the willingness of the editors of *Variety* to include those new forms in their editorial columns. In other words, *Variety* may have followed a successful formula for adapting to change not just because it was in the place where change was happening, but because change itself was pulling on the culture.

Certainly there is room for more research not just on *Variety* and other magazines that track arts and entertainment, but on the dynamics of the b2b magazine industry. It is a huge segment of the magazine world, and while it no doubt operates under many of the same principles guiding consumer magazines, the differences demand separate attention, and therefore separate studies.

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¹ Carl J. Stratman, *Britain's Theatrical Periodicals, 1720-1967, A Bibliography*, New York:

² Stratman, p. ix.

³ Calling itself a *Newspaper* Library is no slight on the magazine industry; many British magazines still refer to themselves as newspapers. *The Economist* is an example.

⁴ Stratman, p. xi.

⁵ "The History of the Halls," no byline, *The Variety Theatre*, No. 1, Vol. 1, May 12, 1905, p. 16.

⁶ For a more complete definition of these forms, see: *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre & Performance*, Dennis Kennedy ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; and *The Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*, Don B. Wilmeth and Tice L. Miller, eds., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

⁷ Fosdick and Cho (2003) explained: "The tendency to define culture in the broadest terms, divorced from its initial association with art, could be one reason why the literature is thin when it comes to research on the journalism of art and criticism..." (p. 3) A broader discussion of that issue can be found in three earlier studies: Fosdick (2001), Fosdick (2002) and Fosdick (2003).

⁸ See: Sammye Johnson and Patricia Prijatel, *Magazine Publishing*, Lincolnwood, IL: NTC/Contemporary Publishing Group, 2000.

⁹ "Introduction," *Interlude*, 14 November 1885, p. 8.

¹⁰ Untitled, un-bylined editorial, *The Playgoer*, Vol. 1, No. 1, November, 1888, p. 4.

¹¹ "Artiste's Directory," *The Variety Stage*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Saturday, 11 January 1896, p. 3.

¹² "Our Bow," *The Variety Stage*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Saturday, 11 January 1896, p. 4.

¹³ "Lightning Interviews," *The Variety Theatre*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Friday, 12 May 1905, p. 19.

¹⁴ Today Leicester Square has at its center a small park with a booth selling theater tickets, usually for half price. The only theaters on the square, however, are movie theaters.

¹⁵ T. Murray Ford, "The Future of the Variety Stage," *Variety* (London), Vol. 1, No. 1, Saturday, 12 February, 1898, p. 2.

¹⁶ "Our Programme," no byline, *The Music Hall*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 16 February 1889, p. 3.

¹⁷ *The Performer*, 29 March, 1906, p. 1.

¹⁸ George LeRoy, "The Last Turn," *The Performer*, 26 September 1957, p. 4.

¹⁹ Ted Moreland, (no headline), *The Performer*, 26 September 1957, p. 14.

²⁰ "Curtain Falls on 'The Performer'," *The Times* (London), 27 September 1957, p. 6.

²¹ "Thanks for the Memory," no byline, *The Times* (London), 2 October 1957, p. 3.

²² *Variety*, First Year, No. 1, December 16, 1905, p. 3.