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## No Business like Show Business: Tracking Commodification over a Century of Variety

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## **No Business Like Show Business: Tracking Commodification Over a Century of *Variety***

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### **Abstract**

Since 1905, *Variety* has thrived as a business magazine serving the producers of popular entertainment. As such, it is a rich chronicle of the economics of pop culture. This content analysis uses the concept of *commodification* to explain shifts in the mix of coverage from 1906 to 2001. It finds significant evidence of commodification and a marked increase in business orientation by 1937, forty years before the rise of business reporting in American newspapers.

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### **Introduction**

Founded in 1905, *Variety* magazine has covered popular culture over a century of transformation from entertainment performed live on neighborhood stages to a proliferation of old and new forms, including digitally manipulated products created both for broadcast to millions and for individual purchase and playback. As a trade publication from the start—“A Variety Paper for Variety People”—it has never lost sight of the bottom line.<sup>1</sup> As such, the magazine is in an excellent position to mirror the progress of commodification in popular culture.

A key concept in critical theory, commodification is the notion that human activity tends over time to lose its intrinsic value and be replaced by purely monetary market value (Hardt, 1992; McQuail, 2000). In other words, commerce eventually overwhelms culture. As a business magazine that has steadily covered the culture industry for nearly 100 years, *Variety* appears to be in a unique position to shed light on a century of change in the production, marketing, and reception of popular arts in America. The question is not whether commerce was important to either the editors of the magazine or to the entertainers it served;

we can presume both wanted to make money. The question, rather, is the degree to which this desire dominated all other concerns, particularly that of making art.

While the field of critical studies has tended to employ qualitative methods, particularly textual analysis, to probe the layers of meaning embedded in cultural artifacts, there is no good reason to avoid quantitative measures when the topic itself is commonly associated with the ultimate quantifying value, the dollar. Certainly there is much to be learned from a textual analysis of the reviews, features, news, tables, photographs, drawings, and advertisements that filled the pages of *Variety* every week for the past 98 years. That might indeed be the next logical step in this research.

For this study, however, it seemed prudent to begin with a content analysis that could provide a concrete framework for an evaluation of the progress of commodification over a large span of time. Employment of the concept of commodification neither implies nor denies acceptance of the totality of critical studies, nor the Marxist economic theories from which it is derived. As Hanno Hardt pointed out in the preface to his book, *Critical Communication Studies*, “Although frequently linked to socialism and Marx’s critique of political economy, social criticism as a scientific approach to solving social problems should be considered in the social and cultural context of different theories which have as their determinate goal the improvement of society” (Hardt, 1992). We shall see how far the idea of commodification takes us; our hunch is that it is at the least a logical starting point, and might well prove to be more than that.

## **Literature Review and Research Questions**

While calling *Variety* a chronicle of popular culture, we hope to avoid the various debates surrounding that term, involving issues of *high* and *low* and the attendant charges of elitism and reverse snobbery (Seabrook, 2000; Shrum, 1996; Adorno, 1991). But to keep things clear for the reader, we cannot avoid defining our central terms. As Raymond Williams points out in *Keywords*, “Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (Williams, 1983, p. 76). Williams detailed multiple definitions of the word, from “...the words and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity” to the much broader definition preferred by many researchers, “...a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general...” This latter definition is closer to the one employed by Hardt (1992): “...the idea of culture should be broadly interpreted to refer to the social context of human existence.” 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, a problem discussed at some length by Fosdick in research on Chicago theater critics (Fosdick, 2001; Fosdick, 2002; Fosdick, 2003a).

A similar paucity exists in the scholarly literature regarding business magazines, sometimes called trade journals or business-to-business (B2B) publications. It is likely that there is proprietary research on business magazines, conducted for and held by individual magazine companies and associations such as American Business Media. But as Endres (1995) has noted, “...many of the articles and books on magazines fail to incorporate this

segment of the field...Indeed, research into the specialized business press is just as likely to come from business schools and humanities programs as journalism/communication departments” (p. 72-73).

Hollifield (1997) noted the lack of research on the role and performance of trade publications in the U.S. media system in his study comparing coverage of an industry-related policy proposal in newspapers, communication-industry trade magazines, and non-communication-industry trade magazines. He found that trade media function as an insider channel, but tend to ignore the social implications of policy proposals.

An earlier study analyzed the research on magazines published in *Journalism Quarterly* from 1964 to 1983, finding that magazine-related research accounted for 6% of total research during the period (Gerlach, 1987). “Nearly three quarters of this research focused on mass periodicals while special periodicals were clearly under-represented” (182). Presumably, any research on trade magazines would have been a subset of those studies dealing with “special periodicals.”

Hsieh, Lu and Lin (2001) is an example of a trade magazine study specifically geared for a particular industrial sector. A number of studies focused on trade magazine advertising (Patti, 1977; Easton & Toner, 1983; Cutler & Javalgi, 1994; Sekely & Blakney, 1994; Kroma & Flora, 2003). In terms of editorial impact, however, the research is thin.

One recent study of business magazines is quite relevant to the current research: Fosdick (2003b) studied London music hall magazines of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early- to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century—contemporaries of America’s *Variety*. Covering the same types of popular stage entertainment that *Variety* covered in its early years, these London magazines failed, Fosdick found, because, unlike *Variety*, they did not expand their coverage to include new forms of entertainment, particularly film, radio and television. Beyond this study, however, there is nothing of direct relevance.

The first half of the term *popular culture* also could become problematic, if we let it. When *Variety* called itself “A Variety Paper for Variety People,” it was referring to the most popular form of mass entertainment of its day, the variety stage, a form that included but was not limited to vaudeville, standing an indeterminate step higher (in terms of respectability) than burlesque and lower than what was for decades referred to as the *legitimate* theater. Perhaps the closest thing to variety entertainment in recent memory is the kind of variety television show best represented by reruns of the old *Ed Sullivan Show*. In 1905, every city of any size had a number of variety stages featuring a variety of acts (hence the name), often including slapstick skits, song and dance numbers, dog and pony acts, and even short films (Senelick, 1993).

While *Variety* was limited to its title entertainment in the early years, it grew to cover all but the fine arts (that is, opera, orchestras, museums, and the like). If that, too, seems a difficult distinction, a single example should help clear things up: When the Metropolitan Opera produces Puccini’s *La Boheme*, it is not covered by *Variety*; when Baz Lurhman directs a pop version of the same opera several blocks away at the Broadway Theatre, *Variety*

does cover it. What qualifies as popular entertainment appears to have changed over the years for the magazine, but what didn't change was the focus on the popular. Hence, despite the various legitimate debates scholars often have over the idea of *popular culture*, we choose here to define it as follows: *Popular culture* is that which gets covered on the pages of *Variety*. In terms of theory, that begs the question; but for all practical purposes, it works perfectly.

How, then, might we expect *Variety* to reflect or reveal commodification at work over the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century? As a magazine created for the producers of variety entertainment, it might be seen as having commodified culture from the outset. Certainly that is what we expect of business magazines today: *we help you make money* is the motto, in one form or another, implied or plainly stated, of most magazines serving the business-to-business (B2B) sector (Johnson & Prijatel, 2000). We do not expect *Meat Marketing and Technology* to include articles that are merely of interest to food producers; in ways large or small we expect each article to suggest ways of maximizing profit potential. But in 1905, the science of B2B publishing was not so exacting. When, in its first issue, *Variety* stated that "We aim to make this an artists' paper" (*Variety*, 1905, 3), the editors did not assume that the sole purpose of working in an industry was to make money. Indeed, they openly acknowledged that variety stage workers might have interests far removed from the footlights.

An article titled "Hobbies of Vaudeville Managers" listed such pursuits as yachting, talking on "the long distance telephone," photography, and horses (*Variety*, 1905, p. 2). And when it comes to artistic productions, *Variety* has always recognized that stage workers' interest in their productions has been a blend of the artistic and the pecuniary. From the start and continuing to this day, *Variety* has offered a mixture of news and commentary, facts and reviews. So the question is not whether it is all one thing or another. If commodification proves to be a useful concept in understanding the development of popular arts in America during the past century, it will be because there has been a shift in emphasis, not a complete abandonment of one value for another.

This leads to the first research question:

**RQ1:** Has the balance of art and commerce in *Variety* changed over the course of the century?

One cannot address the above question without recognizing that the arts themselves have not remained static during the long period in question. The very first issue reveals that the motion picture was beginning to stick its nose under the tent: reviews of variety shows included mention of short films inserted between the live acts (films in which trains often figured prominently—either being robbed or crashing off the rails). In subsequent years, the film industry would grow to nearly eclipse live theater, and would in turn be challenged by television and other electronic forms. Such mechanized forms offered tremendous economies of scale. Why hire a group of performers every night to entertain a room full of people when you can hire them once, film them, and then cheaply reproduce that film for showing in thousands of rooms thousands of times, or, cheaper yet, broadcast the product into peoples' own homes? Early in the century the invention of the phonograph allowed

individual purchase of recorded art; late in the century, compact discs, VHS tapes and DVD recordings expanded on that concept. Indeed, the reduction of a live art to a recorded product that could be bought and sold like so many cans of peanuts could be seen as evidence enough of commodification.<sup>2</sup>

This leads us to research questions two and three:

**RQ2:** Has *Variety* devoted a decreasing proportion of coverage to performing (live) arts over the century?

**RQ3:** Has *Variety* devoted an increasing proportion of coverage to recorded arts over the century?

One of the reasons why commodification is seen as a negative force is the way that it devalues human experience. As Raymond Williams wrote (1988, Chapter 9), “In most description and analysis, culture and society are expressed in an habitual past tense. The strongest barrier to the recognition of human cultural activity is this immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products.” When the experience of a human artist performing live is converted into a DVD recording run through television sets, we seem to be witnessing a literal dehumanization. The intrinsic value of performing art is a human-to-human exchange. Commodification would occur when the human is replaced by the slickly packaged recording. As *Variety* increasingly saw the art that it covered become dehumanized, then, did its interest in human content fade as well? In other words:

**RQ4:** Has the magazine become less people-oriented and more business- and product-oriented over the century?<sup>3</sup>

Finally, if commodification is a singular process, it should make itself felt with more or less equal intensity across all of the above questions. That is, while its power might ebb and flow, it should, when flowing, make itself felt in all areas. Hence:

**RQ5:** Do changes in the balance of art and commerce correlate with changes in the amount of coverage of live arts, recorded arts, people, business, and products?

Certainly *Variety* has much to reveal about culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more than can be contained within the concept of commodification. But we have to start somewhere, and commodification allows us to look at the publication as a whole, excluding none of the areas of coverage, and concentrating on important trends over time. It will give us a start that should prove useful however future studies develop.

## Methodology

### Sample

Answering the research questions required analysis of texts from different time periods. To compare the content changes over time, first, four different years (1906, 1937, 1969, and 2001) were selected by dividing the years between the earliest (1906) and latest

(2001) full year of publication.<sup>4</sup> All 12 months of each of these years were analyzed. Considering the characteristics of the arts and entertainment industry, the sample could not be limited to specific months without skewing toward one artform or another. For example, July and December are active periods for the movie industry and October is the height of the theater season. Therefore, those months are likely to include more coverage of film and theater. It was important to ensure that the differences in coverage resulted from the changes over the century, not from differences in the season. To prevent a seasonal bias, therefore, we selected every month of the year instead of assigning specific months to different years. According to Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (1998), randomly selecting one issue from each month of a weekly magazine is the most efficient sampling method for drawing inferences about a year's content. Since *Variety* is a weekly magazine, the first issue of every month was selected: As a result, a total of 48 issues were selected.

In addition, to see the changes over the years, selecting the same proportion of stories each sample year was necessary. In each issue, 10 stories were selected by the following procedure: Since *Variety* has a long history (about 100 years), the number of pages of publication varied greatly—from 16 to roughly 250 pages. To get the same number of stories (10) from each issue in a systematic way, we divided the total number of pages of a given issue by 10, then chose a story on the selected page. While we could have selected magazine content based on proportion, we chose to use an equal amount of content from all years since the analysis dealt with types of content rather than amount. A total of 480 stories were sampled for the study.

### Coding Categories

The unit of analysis was a lead of the story. The lead is an important part of the story because generally it draws a whole picture of the story, shows the key elements of the story, and often is designed to attract reader attention. We defined the *lead* as the entire *first paragraph* of the story. Although a lead (or first paragraph) may not be a complete account of a story, after comparing 25% of sampled leads with whole stories, we concluded that leads have quite enough and accurate information for our study purposes; therefore, they show a whole picture of a story. On the whole, the first paragraphs were quite long and stories, especially in early years, did not consist of many paragraphs.

The independent variable was four different time periods and the dependent variables were lead contents, which were categorized and operationalized to answer the research questions.

For RQ1 the lead was coded as artistic, commercial, mixed or miscellaneous. Artistic content was operationalized as a lead primarily devoted to artistic concerns, such as a recently opened theater's quality, an artist's creative leap, an actor's challenge with a new role, and reviews that concentrated on the entertainment or artistic qualities of a production. Commercial content was leads mainly devoted to commercial concerns, such as a week's top-selling movie or music album, the commercial success of a new TV series or a new theater, product placement in movies, industry news, and reviews that concentrated on the commercial potential of a production. When both artistic and commercial concerns were treated with equal emphasis in the lead it was coded as mixed. Coded as miscellaneous was

content about celebrities' personal lives, gossip, accidents, death, etc.: those that were judged to have little to do with artistic or commercial concerns.<sup>5</sup>

For RQ2 and RQ3, leads were classified into four categories: live arts, recorded arts for mass consumption, recorded arts for personal consumption, and miscellaneous. Those concerning live arts (for example, theater, live music concerts, and live comedy) and leads about artists and people working in those fields (such as theater workers, musicians, and dancers) were classified as live (performing) arts content. For example, when a lead dealt with a musician's concert, it was categorized as live arts.

Leads dealing with film, radio, and television productions that were recorded and distributed to mass audiences, either through playback in theaters or broadcast over the airwaves, were classified as recorded arts for mass consumption. Also, coverage about people working in these industries, such as movie actors, movie producers/directors, cameramen, film writers, film critics, musicians, radio announcers, and TV stars, were classified as the same category. For example, a lead about a film actress based on her newly released movie fell into this category.

Content about phonograph records, CDs, VHS recordings, DVDs, newspapers or magazines that was recorded but produced for individualized sale and use, was coded as recorded arts for personal consumption. In addition, leads about people working in these fields, such as musicians, film/TV actors, and magazine writers or newspapermen were also classified as recorded arts for personal consumption. For example, a lead about a film actor based on his recently released video and a story about a musician based on her new album fell into this category.

Leads that didn't fall into the above categories were classified as miscellaneous. For instance, when a lead dealt with celebrities' personal lives without mentioning their exact occupation, even though we knew who they were, it was coded as miscellaneous. (Madonna, for example, has appeared on stage and in recordings, so a lead about her that did not specify a project would be marked miscellaneous.)

For RQ4, leads that concentrated on people were coded as people-oriented articles, whereas coverage regarding industries, new productions and/or business news were coded as business- and product-oriented ones. People-oriented coverage was then divided into three sub-categories: artists, business people, and neutral. When a lead dealt with artists, such as actors, performers, directors, musicians, cameramen, writers, and dancers, those who belong to the artistic world, it was coded accordingly, whereas when a lead was about business executives or producers, it was put in the business people category. When a lead was about a person but did not reveal that person's function, it was coded as a people-oriented content, but coded as neutral in the sub-category.

RQ5 involved comparison of the other four RQs; it required no separate coding.

Inter-Coder Reliability and Analysis

The researcher coded all the leads. A pretest, based on a sub-sample of 10% of the stories, was conducted with a second coder to test inter-coder reliability. The Holsti formula yielded inter-coder reliability coefficient of .81.

**Results**

A total of 480 leads (120 leads per year) were analyzed to answer the five research questions.

Among 352 leads over all four years of publication that fell into the categories of artistic and commercial content, commercial content (244 leads) was predominant compared to artistic content (108 leads). The remaining ones include 50 mixed and 78 miscellaneous.

Table 1 shows that in all four years of publication, there was more coverage with commercial content than artistic. The difference of proportion of coverage between artistic and commercial content within the year was statistically significant among the three later years of publications (1937:  $\chi^2 = 37.430, df = 1, p = .001$ ; 1969:  $\chi^2 = 7.716, df = 1, p = .005$ ; and 2001:  $\chi^2 = 13.462, df = 1, p = .001$ ) whereas no significant difference was observed in the earliest issue, 1906  $\chi^2 = 3.322, df = 1, p = .068$ ). In other words, the commercial/artistic mix was more balanced in 1906, but skewed toward the commercial in the latter three years. The chi-square result indicated that the balance of artistic and commercial content in *Variety* has changed over the century ( $\chi^2 = 11.031, df = 3, p = .012$ ). The most notable change occurred between 1906 and 1937. Therefore, the answer to the first research question, “Has the balance of artistic and commercial content in *Variety* changed over the course of the century?,” is positive.

**Table 1**

The numbers and percentages of artistic vs. commercial content within the years

Artistic vs. Commercial content	Year of publication				Total
	1906	1937	1969	2001	
Artistic content	35 (40.2%)	17 (18.3%)	28 (34.6%)	28 (30.8%)	108
Commercial content	52 (59.8%)	76 (81.7%)	53 (65.4%)	63 (69.2%)	244
Total	87	93	81	91	352

$\chi^2 = 11.031, df = 3, p = .012$

\*  $\chi^2$  indicates that the balance of artistic and commercial content in *Variety* has changed over the century.

The second and third research questions, respectively, examined whether 1) the proportion of coverage devoted to the performing arts has decreased over the century; and 2) whether the proportion of coverage devoted to recorded arts has increased over the century in *Variety*. Among the 480 leads analyzed for the study, almost half of them were about

recorded arts for mass consumption (49.2%); more than one third (36.3%) concerned live arts. Except in the 1906 issues, *Variety* has devoted its coverage significantly more to recorded arts for mass consumption than to live arts. Somewhat surprisingly, only 19 leads (4%) were categorized as recorded arts for personal consumption.

Table 2 shows that there was a great difference between 1906 and the other three years in terms of the proportion of coverage devoted to performing arts ( $\chi^2 = 121.402$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p = .001$ ). Before the development of film, radio, or TV (largely recorded arts for mass consumption), almost all the coverage of 1906 was about live arts and people working in that field. In addition, although there seems no significant statistical difference, the proportion of stories devoted to live arts has gradually decreased in the final three quarters of the century, from 1937 to 2001. Again, the greatest decrease was from 1906 to 1937.

**Table 2**

The numbers and percentages of coverage of live vs. recorded arts for mass consumption across the years

Live vs.	Year of publication				Total
	1906	1937	1969	2001	
Recorded arts					
Live arts	106 (60.9%)	29 (16.7%)	22 (12.6%)	17 (9.8%)	174
Recorded arts for mass consumption	0 (0%)	70 (29.7%)	79 (33.5%)	87 (36.9%)	236
Recorded arts for personal consumption	1	3	6	9	19
Miscellaneous	13	18	13	7	51
<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>480</b>

In contrast to the performing arts coverage, the proportion of coverage devoted to recorded arts has increased over the century. Before the development of electronic mass media, there was no story regarding the recorded arts for mass consumption in the 1906 sample (although it should be noted that the first issue in 1905 included articles that mentioned variety shows that included short films). Meanwhile, beginning in 1937, the coverage of recorded arts gradually increased. However, when excluding 1906, the chi-square result suggested that there was no significant difference among years from 1937 to 2001 in terms of a proportion of coverage devoted to recorded arts for mass consumption ( $\chi^2 = 1.839$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = .399$ ). So, again, the main shift in coverage appears to have happened between 1906 and 1937.

Along with examining the proportions of coverage of artistic vs. commercial and live vs. recorded arts, we wondered (RQ4) whether the magazine had become less people-oriented and more business- and product-oriented over the century. Overall, the number of business/product-oriented articles was almost two times more (318) than people-oriented ones (162).

In 1906, *Variety* offered a nearly equal balance, focusing a little bit more on people. Table 3 shows that people-oriented coverage slightly outnumbered (52.5%) business/product-oriented coverage (47.5%) in that year. However, business/product-oriented coverage was dominant for the three later years. Although there was a small increase in 1969 in its offering of people-oriented content, except for the 1906 issues, coverage focusing on business/product pervaded the magazine pages. The answer to the fourth research question, “Has the magazine become less people-oriented and more business-oriented over the century?,” is generally yes with a minor qualification.

**Table 3**

The numbers and percentages of people-oriented vs. business/product-oriented coverage within the years

People-oriented vs. Business/product-oriented	Year of publication				
	1906	1937	1969	2001	Total
People-oriented (artists, businessmen, and neutral)	63 (52.5%)	31 (25.8%)	44 (36.7%)	24 (20%)	162 (33.8%)
Business/product-oriented	57 (47.5%)	89 (74.2%)	76 (63.3%)	96 (80%)	318 (66.3%)
Total	120	120	120	120	480

$\chi^2 = 32.835, df = 3, p = .001$

\*  $\chi^2$  test indicates that there was a difference over the century in balance of coverage between people-oriented and business/product-oriented coverage.

We divided the people-oriented stories into three subgroups (artists, businessmen, and neutral) to see which group has been more covered over the century.<sup>6</sup> Excluding the neutral (or unclassifiable) category, over the years, artists (72.9%) have generally been more covered than the business people (27.1%). Two years, 1906 and 1969, showed a significant difference in the proportion of coverage of artists and businessmen within the year (1906:  $\chi^2 = 27.939, df = 1, p = .001$ ; 1969:  $\chi^2 = 7.410, df = 1, p = .006$ ). Two remaining years (1937 and 2001) did not show a statistical difference (See Table 4).

**Table 4**

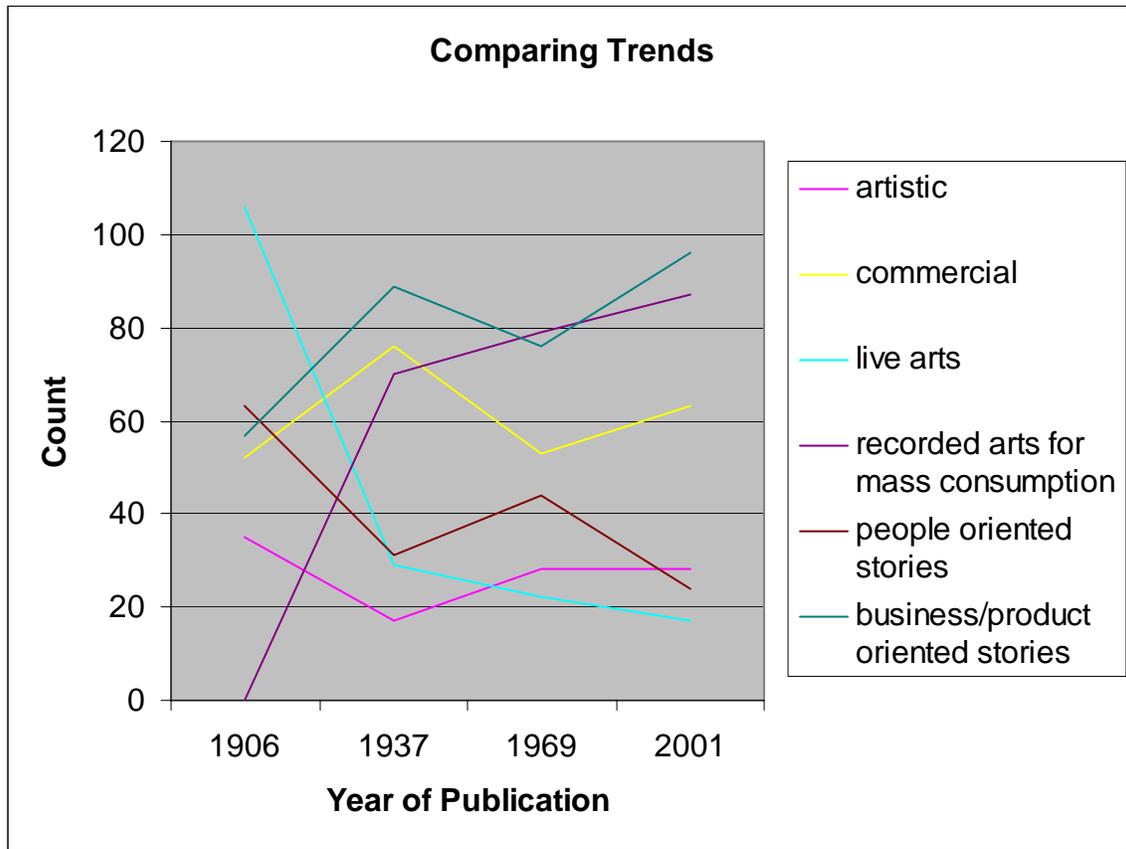
The numbers and percentages of coverage concerning artists vs. businessmen within the years

Artists vs. Businessmen	Year of publication				
	1906	1937	1969	2001	Total
People-oriented (Artists)	43 (87.3%)	11 (50%)	28 (71.8%)	15 (65.2%)	97 (72.9%)
People-oriented (Businessmen)	6 (12.2%)	11 (50%)	11 (28.2%)	8 (34.8%)	36 (27.1%)
Total	49	22	39	23	133

$\chi^2 = 12.033, df = 3, p = .007$

\*  $\chi^2$  result suggests that the balance of coverage between artists and businessmen is significantly different across the years.

From the results, we know that *Variety* is a commercially oriented magazine. Considering that fact, it was rather surprising that the magazine has covered artists more than businessmen. This orientation might be more apparent than real, however. Our tallying of artists versus businessmen was only within the subset of articles already coded as people-oriented. No doubt businessmen figured prominently in the business- and product-oriented stories, whose numbers were greater to begin with. If we had coded the entire sample for mention of businessmen and artists, we might well have found more of the former.



Finally, we tried to determine if any changes in the balance of artistic and commercial content correlate with changes in the amount of coverage of live arts, recorded arts, people, business, and products. (RQ5.)

Similar trends were found 1) between artistic content and people-oriented coverage; and 2) between commercial content and business/product-oriented coverage. Over the years, the mix of coverage devoted to artistic content has changed in a similar pattern with those of people-oriented coverage. However, while the number of leads devoted to artistic content was roughly the same in 1969 and 2001 issues, the number of leads devoted to people has considerably decreased from 1969 to 2001.

Likewise, the mix of leads devoted to commercial content has closely matched fluctuations of business/product-oriented ones. While the peak of the commercial content was 1937, followed by 2001, the peak of the business/product-oriented content was 2001, followed by 1937. Meanwhile, the proportion of coverage of live arts has decreased while coverage of recorded arts has increased over the century. In both cases, the most remarkable change took place between 1906 and 1937 (See Graph 1).

## Discussion

This study appears to have produced *prima facie* evidence of a commodification effect that made itself felt strongly in the first part of the century, and didn't let up. As mass-produced artforms were introduced and embraced, coverage of popular culture in the pages of *Variety* grew increasingly commercial, increasingly technological, and increasingly de-humanized. Focus on art as art was replaced by a focus on art as business.

There appears to be one strong reason for contesting this evidence: Perhaps the shifts in coverage shown by this content analysis result not from commodification, but from an increased business savvy on the part of the editors. It could be argued that the science of business magazine publishing had not progressed very far by 1906, the first full year of operation for *Variety*. It might be that the editors did not at first fully realize that to be successful, a business magazine must focus single-mindedly on helping its readers succeed at their shared business. Certainly they are allowed to have hobbies and artistic preferences and any number of notions about the charms of various artists, but they will only come to consider this magazine indispensable when it begins to consistently offer concrete assistance in making a profit.

But if this is so—and it certainly makes considerable sense—does it necessarily contradict the thesis of commodification? If the leading voice of the culture industry becomes convinced that its own success depends on meeting a perceived interest on the part of its readers in maximizing profits, at the expense of content that relates to the intrinsic value of the artistic creations that are the basis for said profit, is that not tantamount to commodification? If the profit motive drives the publishers to stop talking about art and concentrate on market values, that *is* commodification. Indeed, we would argue that the major trend of business publishing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been in support of commercialization and commodification. Not only are there other businesses like show business, the business of all business is the same: maximizing profit. And so long as that is true, the business of business magazines will be to help readers do just that, with no apologies. This is undeniably good practice on the part of magazine editors and publishers. It is also, we would argue, evidence of commodification.

Similarly, one might say that it is only natural that early in the century, *Variety* devoted more ink to live performances, since most recording media had not yet come into being, with the exception of printed matter, phonograph records, and short films. For this reason, that finding is not surprising. But this doesn't contradict the idea that the twentieth century saw a phenomenal increase in the power of commodification. No, *Variety* did not impose commodification on the entertainment industry. But it certainly reflects its rise.

The role of technology in this cannot be denied, and it is open to divergent interpretation. One might see technology as an engine running on its own track, beholden only to the unpredictable advances of science. A more common view, however, sees technology as the response to perceived needs, and not immune to the profit motive. It is interesting to note that *Variety* came into being at a time when the dominant theatrical mode was the *machine play*—commercial products that dazzled audiences with elaborate sets, heavenly ascensions, sea-battles. The New York Syndicate (precursors to the Shuberts) had begun mass-producing plays and sending out touring companies, a development made possible by the completion of the transcontinental railroad. (Fosdick 2001) Technology certainly plays a part in the progress of storytelling from cavemen sitting around a fire to medieval pageant wagons to mass produced DVDs. Yes, one might say that much of what we attribute to commodification is simply the result of technology. We would put it another way: Technology very often is the means by which commodification plays itself out. If it helps increase monetary value without a concomitant increase in artistic value, then it is, by definition, a tool in service of commodification.

The difficulty of separating such concepts might be one reason why critical theorists prefer qualitative methods. Certainly one content analysis is not enough to establish the utility of quantitative methods in service of concepts derived from critical theory. This may well be seen as a weakness of this study. On the other hand, if the debate is joined, new possibilities of cross-fertilization may present themselves.

It is worth highlighting how quickly business news came to dominate the pages of *Variety*. In American newspapers, the great surge in business reporting occurred in the 1970s and 1980s (Barchie, 1982; Bonafed, 1980; Hynds, 1980; MacDougall, 1980). This study shows that the transformation in focus occurred much earlier in *Variety*, between 1906 and 1937. Even accounting for the difference in focus between business magazines and family newspapers, that is a remarkable finding.

Clearly, then, both *Variety* and the industry it covered developed considerable savvy when it came to heightening the commercial appeal of their products. The only loser in this equation, if there is one, appears to be the public. When art becomes a profit machine, is it hopelessly romantic to suggest that as a culture we might have reached a point of diminishing returns? It is beyond the scope of this study to establish what values are lost when the purely commercial takes precedence in popular culture, to wonder at, much less establish and delineate, the diminishment of art's power to restore, humanize, transcend, explain, and invigorate our public and private lives. It is enough to provide evidence of the effect of commodification on the pages of the oldest chronicle of show business in America.

Rather than sampling randomly from the entire magazine, future research might look at lead stories of *Variety* to see if the main focus has changed over the years. Researchers interested in exploring the development of popular culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century might focus on the changing role of the individual artist, and his or her representation in magazines like *Variety*. The working conditions of the actor, for example, appear to have changed in interesting ways: At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the typical actor worked for a troupe

led by an actor-manager (such as Richard Mansfield). By the middle of the century, many actors were contract players for studios: their careers were managed by corporate producers. Increasingly by the end of the century, talent management companies (like ICM) called the shots, packaging stars with bit players in mega-deals with shifting alliances of producing companies. How did *Variety* cover and perhaps influence these realignments of power and the driving forces of production? What were the effects of its increased emphasis on commercial concerns on the typical industry worker, on the development of the artform, and on the value delivered to audiences worldwide? The answers to these and other related questions await further study.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This slogan first appeared – without byline, headline, or further explanation – on the third page of the first issue of *Variety* on December 16, 1905.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that mediated art is pure evil, or even that it is necessarily inferior to live art. But from the point of view of the worker, it is undeniably less personal, and thereby takes on a major characteristic of commodification. The question of technology as a separate influence is considered in the discussion section.

<sup>3</sup> Again, while we hold that the replacement of people stories with business stories is evidence of commodification, we would never argue that people stories are in always superior. Certainly an in-depth report on the music business is better journalism than the typical profile of the latest pop diva.

<sup>4</sup> Special circumstances may make these years less than ideal: In 1937, the Great Depression was still on. In 1969, we had a cultural revolution of sorts. Unfortunately, alternative years seemed arbitrary, and none was free from potential confounds. Booms and busts in both commerce and cultural foment seem unavoidable.

<sup>5</sup> As stories of personal lives, these have greater meaning in the coding for research question four.

<sup>6</sup> Since our analysis stretched back nearly 100 years, we did not rely on coders' ability to identify names as those of artists or businessmen. Even if the coder was familiar with the name, he or she would register a name according to the way it was presented in the story.