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# Finger on the Pulse of Lifestyle Coverage: Redefining What It Means to be a City/Regional Magazine in the Time of COVID-19

Adam Pitluk 

Edwards College of Communication, Media & Culture, Coastal Carolina University, Conway, SC, USA

## ABSTRACT

This study examines what city/regional magazines across the US did to ensure their longevity while the activities in those represented cities were canceled and many businesses closed for more than a year because of COVID. This study also explores what role the city/regional magazine played in the recovery measures of the city as COVID became more manageable. Finally, this study uncovers phenomena that occurred as the role of city/regional magazines changed in the wake of the pandemic.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

COVID; city magazine; regional magazine; hierarchy of influences; editors; content

There was a time when readership and financial success of city and regional magazines were so widespread that the journalism within their pages was unencumbered by pecuniary considerations—like a flu pandemic or a natural disaster—and could therefore represent a thorough, deep dig of trending lifestyle news and events that other media was not designed to do. The long-form narrative structure of legacy print city and regional magazines enabled the writers to convey nuanced accounts that were too lengthy for daily newspapers and not easily packaged for radio or television (Tebbel and Zuckerman 1991; Greenberg 2000; Hafez 2017). Tellingly, the existence of city and regional magazines throughout American history significantly contributed—and contributes to this day—to the shaping of culture and the marketplace of ideas in a particular city or region (Hafez 2017). This concept is particularly apropos concerning the relationship of city and regional magazines to their readership and the shaping of opinion and policy in the public sphere in the time of COVID.

This study examines what city and regional magazines across the United States did to ensure that they stay in business while the businesses and activities in the cities that they represent were shuttered for more than a year—and then reopened with social distancing and mask mandates—because of COVID. This study also explores what role the city and regional magazine play in the recovery of cities across the country as COVID becomes more manageable. Finally, this study uncovers patterns and phenomena that occurred as the role of the city regional magazine was tweaked in some cases and redefined in others in the wake of the pandemic, producing some success stories and a blueprint for how city and regional magazines can approach troubled times in the future.

## Literature Review

Historically the role of the legacy print city and regional magazine is attributed with helping shape the lifestyle and culture of the city or region it represents (Mott 2002). As Greenberg (2000) noted, the pulse of a city is not only defined by its geography, but through its cultural representation to the masses. Moreover, from a historical perspective, the image or brand a city conveys through its marketing is perpetuated and, at times, reimaged by the city and regional magazine (2000). This was particularly applicable during the legacy print city/regional magazine's heydays of the 1960s through the 1990s, before the advent of the internet and before global connectivity (Greenberg 2000; Mott 2002; Sergey, Julia, and Alexey 2019). City and regional magazines use discursive strategies to create imagined communities of readers and idealized versions of cities (Jenkins 2011, 2016).

Jenkins (2016) looked frequently at award-nominated city magazines from 2014–2016 to inform her research using textual analysis to evaluate editorial content in three issues each of *Los Angeles* magazine, *Cincinnati* magazine, *Portland Monthly*, *Memphis* magazine, and *Indianapolis Monthly*. She found that all five magazines directed their content “toward highly educated, affluent, engaged readers through emphasizing ways they could experience their cities through consumption and highlighting issues and perspectives important to upper-class ‘insiders’” (Jenkins 2016, 319).

### Definition of a Legacy Print City/Regional Magazine

This paper defines legacy print city/regional magazines as magazines that maintain a print presence and focuses on general interest topics covering a local or regional area (Frequently Asked Questions about CRMA 2020). To be considered as a city or regional magazine in this study, the publication must have already completed or be in the process of completing a circulation audit and must be primarily distributed through the mail or through newsstand sales (2020). From an editorial standpoint, to be considered a legacy print city/regional magazine, the publication must adhere to separation standards of advertising and editorial commensurate with journalistic industry standards (2020), and must be published at least quarterly with general interest content focused on life and living in a specific city, state, or region (City and Regional Magazine Association Magazine Membership Guidelines 2015).

### A Struggling Industry Even Before the Pandemic

Legacy print city/regional magazines are no stranger to conflict and adversity in the publishing industry. Back in 2014, when many newspapers and magazines were limping off to their dying places, Sivek (2014) highlighted the major hurdles facing the city/regional magazine industry, including competition from digital media (with no legacy print component, therefore cheaper to produce and distribute); competing with user-generated content that can be produced in perpetuity with limitless resources; and readers' changing habits. But the problems of the city/regional magazine predate the aforementioned issues mentioned in 2014. In fact, while Sivek (2014) was predicting a dire future for city magazines unless successfully retooled, the American economic picture was one of prosperity, booming back from the 2007–2008 financial disaster (Furman 2014). Former

Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers Jason Furman wrote that in 2014, American businesses set a record for the most consecutive months of job growth and that the economy had already added more jobs than in any full calendar year since 1990 (Furman 2014). Meanwhile, city/regional magazine circulation and readership numbers were shrinking, as were legacy print daily newspapers (Sivek 2014; Pitluk 2021a; Gade and Lowrey 2011).

Five years after Sivek's (2014) research painted a picture of the evolving digital environment that city/regional magazines were up against, another study said that city magazines needed to reimagine themselves if they were to survive the digital divide (Svachula 2019). That was exactly what they did.

Svachula posited that because of the ominous situation facing legacy print newspapers and alternative weekly print newspapers and how those institutions were laying people off, legacy print city/regional magazines hired the newly unemployed reporters and put them to work for expansive city magazine coverage (2019). This trend was exposed at the City and Regional Magazine Association conference in 2019, where 40 city and regional magazine publishers gathered to discuss the trend of acquiring laid-off newspaper and alt-weekly reporters to expand their coverage (2019).

That's when city/regional magazines came together at the 2019 City and Regional Magazine Association conference in La Jolla, California, and where the top city and regional magazine editors and publishers from across the country gathered to figure out a damage plan to avoid their own extinction (Pitluk 2021b; Svachula 2019; Bunce 2017). And it worked. By January 2020, the number of print consumer magazines in the United States hit its highest number in history with 7416 titles (Watson 2021). Indeed, as the year 2020 revved up, city magazines were on target to be the great success story of print journalism. All indicators pointed to the fact that the lifestyle element of city magazines, coupled with the stepped-up suburban news and feature coverage picked-up in the wake of daily newspapers abandonment, were to be game changers for both editorial coverage and financial gains. But then the business world came to a hard, abrupt stop and had to reconfigure how they approached covering news and lifestyle coverage in cities that did not have any lifestyle events occurring (Gutsche 2015). City and regional magazines needed to revert to explicating news coverage of a single event and distribute it across entire sectors in order to demonstrate how various sections of the cities they covered adapted to the mass closures (2015).

Enter March 2020 and the very public and immoderate coverage of COVID-19.

For the second time in the twenty-first century, city/regional magazines were forced to play defense, were forced to reimagine themselves and, in the wake of closing restaurants and canceled city events, were forced to once again fight for their survival. Hess and Waller (2017) in their research discussed the concept of developing a "sense of place" with readers vis-a-vis local media outlets. These publications, when most effectual, bring together historical, regional, national and international perspectives (56). As such, readers are "placed"

## Research Questions

Legacy print city magazines proved they were resilient in the years between the 2008 financial crisis and the 2020 COVID pandemic. To wit, while many newspapers and

alternative weeklies in the legacy print media sphere shut their doors in that 12-year time-frame, city magazine numbers ebbed but then surged going into 2020 (Watson 2021). However, the COVID pandemic was not anticipated by city/regional magazines, and considering their main *raison d'être* is to cover the lifestyle of their cities, what were they supposed to do when lifestyle—and life, as it were—was essentially canceled for more than a year? Therefore, this study addresses the following research questions posed to city/regional magazine editor-in-chiefs:

RQ1: How would you describe the COVID crisis' impact on your magazine's editorial direction?

RQ2: Have you had to deviate from your editorial mission and restructure which stories you do because of the pandemic?

RQ3: Have you had to deviate from your editorial mission and restructure which advertisements you'll accept because of the pandemic?

RQ4: What do you foresee as the long-term effects of this pandemic on your magazine?

RQ5: What will your magazine's role be in aiding the recovery measures of your city?

The research questions were intentionally broad so that the interviewees could speak freely about the broad topic. Additionally, the research questions were asked in such a way to allow room for follow-up questions if the researcher either needed clarification or wanted to dig deeper into an answer.

The theoretical lens through which this research was viewed was Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy of Influences (Shoemaker and Reese 1991; Reese 2019), which revealed itself during a grounded theory approach to the in-depth semi-structured interviews (see "Method" section). The Hierarchy of Influences theory refers to a mode of collecting, analyzing, and describing various factors that affect news content (2019). This theory analyzes how the individual or organization/publication interacts with society's social systems on a macro, meso and micro level (2019). The Hierarchy of Influences considers how individuals operate within larger social, economic, and political structures (2019). This approach considers "factors at multiple levels of analysis that shape media content, the journalistic message system, from the micro to the macro," and as a result, at "each level, one can identify the main factors that shape the symbolic reality constituted and produced by journalism" (Reese 2016, 727).

The Hierarchy of Influences model proffers five levels: the individual (micro), organization (meso), and social institution and social system factors (macro) that influence the production and execution of news and media (Figueroa 2020).

Starting with the micro level, the individual level of influence assumes that personal characteristics and traits when juxtaposed with the person's professional role and the news values he/she adheres to, shapes the media content journalists create (Figueroa 2020).

Next, the meso level concerns the editorial policies, practices, and hierarchical newsroom structures that impacts the editorial process (Anderson 2017). This organizational level of influence refers to the policies and economic conditions of a media organization, like a newspaper, a news station, or a city/regional magazine (Reese 2019; Anderson 2017).

Finally, at the macro level (e.g., social-institution level), the focus is on external forces that play a significant role in influencing the media content, such as advertisers' behaviors

in the geographic region (Reese 2019; Figueroa 2020). At the macro level, journalists may face influences from social systems as a whole as well, including regional ideology and idiosyncratic norms and values that affect what the media covers, and how they cover it (Reese 2019).

The Hierarchy of Influences framework, especially when considering the intersection of the individual editor, the city/regional magazine's editorial mission, and the global pandemic's affect on what news is covered and how it is covered, allowed the researcher to better understand what kind of organizational challenges individual editors faced, if there were similar challenges that other city/regional magazine editors experienced irrespective of geographic and regional ideological differences, and how the institution of city/regional magazines changed to both serve its readers and ensure its survival (Ejaz, Ittefaq, and Arif 2022). While all levels have an impact on the journalists' output, and considering there is no level pecking order of importance, the deprivation of any of these levels can cause obstacles for the journalist, as evidenced by the global shut down of city goings-on in the wake of COVID-19 (Kunert et al. 2022).

## Method

The qualitative method used was semi-structured in-depth interviews. This approach was couched in a grounded theory framework and coded using keywords and synonyms for those words used by the interviewees (Deterding and Waters 2021; Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Grounded theory is a systematic research approach involving the discovery of theory through data collection and analysis (Harris 2015). Of particular importance, grounded theory's focus is on inductively constructing theory through methodic gathering and analysis of data (Harris 2015). By methodically gathering, capturing, and analyzing data, the researcher deduced that Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy of Influences would be the best theory to use for this study (Shoemaker and Reese 1991; Harris 2015; Reese 2016; Reese 2019).

To answer the research questions, this qualitative study employed in-depth semi-structured interviews of top city and regional magazine editors across the United States. A qualitative interview is a flexible—and powerful—data gathering tool for collecting detailed information about a person's thoughts and behaviors, as well as when the researcher wants to explore contemporary issues in depth (Boyce and Neale 2006; Creswell and Miller 2000). Such a topic has not been investigated thus far.

## Sampling/Participant Recruitment

To recruit interviewees for this study, editors-in-chief from successful legacy print city/regional magazines were selected from the 2021 list of City and Regional Magazine Association (CRMA) finalists and winners in the Best City or Regional Magazine General Excellence category. In an attempt to choose participants with the same approach that Jenkins (2016) did in her seminal study on magazine journalism, the researcher chose CRMA's list as the list from which to choose publications because this association is the chief sanctioning body of city and regional magazines, and this nonprofit organization has been industry-recognized as the gold-standard of

**Table 1.** CRMA membership guidelines (2022).

City and Regional Magazine Association Magazine Membership Guidelines	
<div>1) Be published at least quarterly with general interest content focused on life and living in a specific city, state, or region.</div> <div>2) CRMA has adopted the 2015 ASME editorial guidelines as the editorial guidelines for CRMA. Member publications must comply with those guidelines, which among other standards requires publications to exhibit a clear distinction between editorial and advertising in typography and the conspicuous labeling of special advertising sections, and avoid the placement of advertising pages adjacent to related editorial materials in a manner that implies editorial endorsement of the advertised product or service.</div> <div>3) Be audited or have circulation verified by an independent entity acceptable to CRMA* within 15 months of becoming a member of CRMA and to obtain an updated circulation audit not less than every two years thereafter.</div> <div>4) Active voting membership in CRMA is available to those publications with 60% or more in audited paid circulation or to those publications, which have a USPS periodicals postal permit. Affiliate, non-voting membership is available to those publications with less than 60% paid circulation.</div> <div>5) CRMA member publications may not have more than 25% of total audited distribution by way of unrequested hotel copies, unrequested waiting room copies or through free rack distribution.</div> <div>6) Remit membership dues within 30 days of billing.</div> <div>7) Submit copies for review by members of the Membership Committee and Board of Directors for adherence to content guidelines every two years following acceptance.</div> <div><b>Failure to comply with the membership guidelines of the City and Regional Magazine Association may result in the following remedial actions by the Board of Directors.</b></div> <div><div>1) A warning letter explaining non-compliance with recommended remedies and a timeframe for effectively addressing these issues.</div><div>2) Prohibition from submitting any entries for consideration in the CRMA Annual Awards of Excellence and participation in Publishers' Roundtables.</div><div>3) Termination based on a vote of three-fourths of the Board of Directors</div></div> <tr><td><div>Note: All recommendations of the Membership Committee regarding membership are subject to final approval by the CRMA Board of Directors.</div><div>*Circulation audits shall be performed by BPA, ABC, VAC or CVC. For publications located outside the US, firms providing equivalent audit services may be accepted at the discretion of the Membership Committee.</div></td></tr>	<div>Note: All recommendations of the Membership Committee regarding membership are subject to final approval by the CRMA Board of Directors.</div> <div>*Circulation audits shall be performed by BPA, ABC, VAC or CVC. For publications located outside the US, firms providing equivalent audit services may be accepted at the discretion of the Membership Committee.</div>
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facilitating professional development and training for member magazines in methods since 1978 (City and Regional Magazine Association Magazine Membership Guidelines 2015). To wit, the CRMA membership guidelines ensure that only magazines adhering to the highest standards are permitted to join its ranks (see Table 1 for membership guidelines). Members must also be independently audited to ensure circulation accuracy (Greenberg 2000; Pitluk 2021b; Witschge 2013). City and regional magazines that could win editorial awards for their publications based on 2020 coverage were the industry's standard-bearers. All this together helped buttress the researcher's subtext for choosing this list: All of the editors interviewed helmed a city magazine that won an award in 2021, a year after the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic. Tellingly, the city magazines that were winners and finalists of the CRMA's 2021 General Interest category were in the winner's circle because of the quality of the magazines they produced during the dog days of the pandemic. Simply stated, these city magazines, according to a jury of their peers, performed the best and produced the best content during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The researcher reached out to all 15 CRMA magazine editors-in-chief who were finalists in 2021 for the General Excellence award. There were three categories of General Excellence: circulation less than 30,000 ( $n = 5$ ); circulation 30,000–60,000 ( $n = 5$ ); and circulation over 60,000 ( $n = 5$ ). Fifteen editors were contacted by email requesting interviews. As editors began to respond and as interviews were set up, follow-up emails for those that did not answer original emails were sent. The intent was to continue to interview city magazine editors from the 2021 CRMA list of General Excellence finalists and



winners until saturation of patterns and phenomena was achieved. In the absence of saturation, the researcher was prepared to add editors from the 2019 and 2020 lists of CRMA winners and finalists, although the researcher believed these earlier lists would not be a proper representation of magazines that performed well during the pandemic for the purposes of this study. All editors appearing in this study gave fully informed consent to the interviews and to being named in the research. The researcher anonymized those editors who did not respond to the emails requesting participation. Saturation was met with the 2021 list of CRMA winners and finalists.

Eight people were interviewed for this study, and interviews lasted between 45 min to 1 h 23 min. The researcher only approached editors-in-chief of the magazines from the 2021 CRMA finalist and winners list, and everyone interviewed was the editor-in-chief of his/her publication with the exception of the *Washingtonian*: they were between editors at the time of the research gathering, so the researcher interviewed the highest person on the masthead that was in charge of editorial content. That happened to be Owner/CEO/Editorial Director Cathy Merrill Williams. (See [Table 2](#) for the full list of those contacted and those who responded. The editors of non-participating publications have been anonymized.)

Qualitative in-depth interviewing, in the quest to uncover the most in-depth coverage of a subject, focuses on depth of data collection rather than breadth in terms of sample size, “even if this means focusing the study on certain parts of the population rather than achieving a more broadly defined sample” (Ritchie et al. 2013, 135). There is no consensus among qualitative research scholars regarding how many interviews are enough for in-depth qualitative research, but most scholars maintain that a range of interviews is necessary to reach saturation (Dworkin 2012; Morse 1995). Saturation is defined as the point whereby the data collection process no longer offers new or relevant data and when the answers become iterative (Mason 2010; Marshall et al. 2013). Because there is no overriding consensus among scholars, and based on the average of the two defining works, the researcher conducted interviews for this study until it was deemed to have reached saturation, which should have happened between the range of five-to-10 interviews per subject area. Using grounded theory, five themes presented themselves among the majority of the editors, and the researcher started to see saturation after the fifth interview, but continued to interview editors to be sure. The researcher was sure saturation had been met after eight interviews. The researcher went beyond the minimum and collected more data than was required.

These in-depth interviews were all conducted over Zoom with the camera on, and all sessions were recorded. All interviews of editors-in-chief were conducted between 2 March 2022 and 10 March 2022, so all editors were speaking from the same moment in time while exposed to the same social and health issues in society. The qualitative data was analyzed using repetitive reading and coding, and then was cross-validated by an additional researcher. All research was hand-coded in a logbook and color-coded with different highlighter colors to represent responses for each research question. The two researchers used the data from the research to help explain the role, reach, scope, limitations, and future of legacy print city magazines in the face of a global pandemic. A copy editor from the journalism industry also read and cross-checked the data to help ensure accuracy.



**Table 2.** 2021 CRMA finalists and winners approached.

City and Regional Magazine Association 2021 finalists		
Magazine	Circulation	Editor
Columbus Monthly	Less than 30,000	
Honolulu Magazine	Less than 30,000	
Louisville Magazine	Less than 30,000	Josh Moss
Madison Magazine	Less than 30,000	Andrea Behling
Sonoma Magazine	Less than 30,000	
Baltimore Magazine	30,000-to-60,000	Max Weiss
D Magazine	30,000-to-60,000	
Portland Monthly	30,000-to-60,000	
Seattle Met	30,000-to-60,000	Angela Cabotaje
St. Louis Magazine	30,000-to-60,000	
Boston Magazine	More than 60,000	Chris Vogel
Mpls.St.Paul Magazine	More than 60,000	
Philadelphia Magazine	More than 60,000	Brian Howard
Washington Magazine	More than 60,000	Cathy Merrill Williams (CEO/Owner/Editorial Director)
Texas Monthly	More than 60,000	Dan Goodgame

## Results

The results of the five research questions yielded five major themes. Below are the key answers to the research questions along with significant representative quotes from city magazine editors-in-chief.

### *The COVID Crisis' Impact on a City Magazine's Editorial Direction*

The first research question (RQ 1) looked for patterns that the pandemic had on city and regional magazines throughout the country irrespective of the circulation size of the magazine or of the population size of the city it serves. All eight editors confirmed that their editorial direction changed like it never had before in each of their magazines' histories. Max Weiss, editor-in-chief of *Baltimore* magazine, posed the perfect rhetorical question that summed up the dilemma facing all of the editors: "How do you put out a lifestyle magazine when there's no lifestyle?" It was a sentiment echoed by the other seven editors. Weiss, who has been with *Baltimore* magazine for 30 years and was therefore a good person to comment on the pulse of the magazine's editorial direction from a longitudinal perspective, said that the ways in which news was reported for stories had to change drastically. That is to say, Weiss and the other editors instructed their reporters to cover stories in ways that otherwise would have been frowned upon before the pandemic.

For one, I permitted all writers to do Zoom interviews, including myself. Of course, that's not what you want to do when you're a lifestyle magazine, because lifestyle is best reported when observed in real life. Some reporters were bold and put on a mask and went out there to interview people, but that was not required of them. (Max Weiss, *Baltimore* magazine)

Dan Goodgame, editor-in-chief of *Texas Monthly*, also spoke of the creative measures his writers and reporters undertook to conduct interviews—methods that would never be acceptable at any other moment in time at *Texas Monthly*, nor at his former employer, *Time* magazine.

For some of the older folks we interviewed, we got their kids or their grandkids to go over and set them up on Zoom because they weren't familiar with the technology. We had other

occasions where we got people to come out on their front porch of their house and we would shout the questions from the sidewalk and take their pictures from the sidewalk with a zoom lens. In the past, I would always send back stories to reporters saying, “you know, I can tell this interview was done by email because no human ever spoke this way to someone.” Someone was curating their quotes. Now, because of COVID, we had to start accepting some of those interviews over email. (Dan Goodgame, *Texas Monthly*)

Another editorial pattern came in the form of the amount of work that staffers and freelancers had to assume because of layoffs and furloughs. With the exception of *Texas Monthly* and *Washingtonian* magazine, all the other editors interviewed had to lay off or furlough staffers because of COVID. Since many of the staffs were already operating with minimal numbers, this compounded the stress and the work that each employee had to do. Andrea Behling, editor-in-chief of *Madison* (Wisconsin) magazine, used the words “flexible” and “pivot” to describe the changes that were not only necessary for her staffers to be successful, but for her to be successful as an editor. These keywords were echoed by all of the other editors as well, thereby producing a major theme: staffs needed to become more flexible and learn to pivot whereby they had the luxury of long lead times to create their content in the past (average lead time, according to all of the editors interviewed, is approximately three months).

The number-one thing we all had to do was learn to pivot and to be more flexible. In the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, it felt like we were running forward in the dark. We had to rip up our entire June issue, which was going to be our Best Of issue, so we had to start that from scratch and cancel our big Best Of party. We only had about a week to do that. Everyone had to go back to their general assignment reporting days and do stories on really tight deadlines. ... There were a lot of tears in the beginning. (Andrea Behling, *Madison* magazine)

### ***Editorial Mission and Story Selection in the Face of the Pandemic***

Per research question two (RQ 2) all eight magazine editors interviewed said that their magazines have an editorial mission. Paraphrased, the editorial missions of all eight titles is to showcase the best—and at times, the worst—of a city in order for the readers to be entertained, informed, and as *Boston* magazine editor Chris Vogel aptly summed up, “[our magazine] helps readers develop a deep, personal connection to their city and catapults captivating stories and ideas into the spotlight. In short, our mission is this: to increase the joy of living in Boston today.” Vogel provided examples of how *Boston* magazine has adhered to this editorial mission in some form since the magazine’s inception in 1805.

We’ve always done hard-hitting and frontline service journalism, and although it became more challenging as we had to pivot during the pandemic, we maintained our editorial mission and refocused our content on the topics that COVID exploited. For our summer issues, we usually highlight all the festivals and galas going on in Boston. We turned one of those issues into an issue highlighting summer road trips so that people could social distance easier and get out of their houses. We turned our profiles into profiles of local heroes. We did the first and only in-depth narrative on the race for hometown Moderna bringing a vaccine to market. So our editorial mission to increase the joy of living in Boston didn’t change, but the structure of our stories pivoted and a harder news approach occurred. (Chris Vogel, *Boston* magazine)

All of the editors said that their restaurant reviews and dining coverage, which constitutes large swaths of editorial coverage in all CRMA magazines, pivoted to coverage of restaurants providing take-out or delivery, and the reviews softened—if not altogether disappeared—in exchange for highlighting the restaurants that were remaining open during the pandemic. All of the editors also said that in the darkest days of the pandemic (March 2020–January 2021), a focus was put on highlighting the everyday heroes that inspired citizens—and that previously may have gone unnoticed—during the pandemic. In particular, nurses, teachers, restaurant workers, and drivers, but also students became the focal point of coverage. Thusly, a second pattern was discovered by this research: the subjects of long-form narrative coverage.

Many magazine editors started as newspaper reporters and as a result, adhere to a journalistic routine taught in journalism school and honed in a daily newspaper newsroom that has existed in local media for decades (Ekdale et al. 2015; Carey 1982). Research suggests that a management knowledge gap exists between editors and reporters because editors of most magazines were once reporters, promoted and not necessarily trained on management skills in their new leadership roles (Ekdale et al. 2015; Lacy, Stamm, and Martin 2014). Rather, the career trajectory was that a reporter was promoted based on merit into an editor leadership and management role, and had to rely on the management style of the manager before him/her by which to lead (Ekdale et al. 2015). That is because the speed of monthly magazine journalism did not wait for a reporter-turned-editor to learn classical management curriculum (Ekdale et al. 2015; Pitluk 2021b). Moreover, it is because the traditional custom in journalism is to identify talented reporters and promote them to managers. As a result, city and regional magazine editors—like daily newspaper editors—for the most part assume a learn-by-watching management style and employ that style when they are promoted into management (Massey 2016; Lacy, Stamm, and Martin 2014). They therefore do not deviate from the way they were managed, and most of those managers did not deviate from the subjects that city and regional magazines covered (Massey 2016).

It is worth noting that in Louisville, Kentucky, in addition to dealing with the pivot that the pandemic compelled the magazine to take, *Louisville* magazine editor Josh Moss was dealing with a second explosive story: The death of Breonna Taylor at the hands of police, and the protests that ensued.

Most of the country shut down and sent people home on March 13, 2020. Friday the 13th. That was the day the police killed Breonna Taylor in her apartment. Those two moments will be forever intertwined in Louisville and for me, that's when the editorial mission of *Louisville* magazine—which turned 50 that month—changed forever. This city hadn't seen race issues like that since the 1960s. Our mission was still to entertain and inform our readers, but it now became about bringing them together, in the face of the pandemic and in the face of the Breonna Taylor protests. (Josh Moss, *Louisville* magazine)

Moss said that in the months and years since the intertwining events of Friday, 13 March 2020, *Louisville* magazine has had difficult discussions in its pages about racial justice as well as the city's place in American society, and where the culture of the city needs to go. *Louisville* magazine's editorial staff have also declared a mission, like all eight editors of the other city and regional magazines interviewed said that they would do in the wake of COVID: to highlight the unsung heroes and laypeople in the city

more often. *Louisville* took this concept to the extreme with their high school senior project that Moss undertook in 2021, where his team set out to interview every high school senior in Louisville to learn about them. They did a similar project with restaurant workers. A staple of *Louisville* magazine has always been their Kentucky Derby coverage. Derby insiders know that the horses that run the Derby are 3 years old, and the economic impact the Derby has on the city of *Louisville* because of the running of these 3-year-old horses is approximately \$350 million annually (Jones 2022). In the wake of the pandemic, Moss wondered what that money would do to improve the lives of 3-year-old humans, so he set out to launch an interview series with 3-year-olds. “Corona definitely changed how I approach my job,” Moss said.

### ***The Effects Advertising Had on Editorial Content During the Pandemic***

All of the editors interviewed were fiercely proud that the editorial content remained segregated from the advertising content, even in the darkest days of COVID in 2020. This became clear in the answers to research question number three (RQ 3). Not a single editor said that they sold editorial content to advertisers, even during dire financial situations in late spring/early summer of 2020 when advertisers were pulling out and office managers were canceling subscriptions because there were no people in waiting rooms. Hotels were also canceling their in-room copies because nobody was traveling. Newsstand sales tanked as well, the editors said, because many bookstores were closed. When they did open back up, customers were hesitant to touch a newsstand copy of a magazine that other people had touched, especially because one of the narratives coming from the World Health Organization at the time was that surfaces, including paper, could facilitate the spread of COVID because the virus could live on those surfaces for 28 days (Meredith 2020). Hotel copies didn’t return. In a parallel industry, in-flight magazines on airplanes disappeared from every domestic carrier except United Airlines.

Cathy Merrill, owner, CEO, and editorial director of the *Washingtonian*, qualified the reaction that she and five of the other city magazines adopted, which was to clamp down on expenditures and expense accounts to hedge the loss of advertising revenue. That is because she learned a lesson in 2008 when the housing bubble burst and she lost a quarter of her revenue (real estate advertisements account for almost a quarter of advertising revenue). Back then, she did not change her expenses policy or her expense account budget for her writers and editors. As a result, she had to lay off staff. “I still have a knot in my stomach about it. I think, ‘I should have been wiser back then’,” she said. But because there was nothing she could do with falling real estate and restaurant advertising revenue while the country was shut down in 2020—and because her staff was not needing to travel as much for stories—she put a moratorium on all expenses and made anything that cost more than \$20 require her personal approval.

Our motto during 2020 was, “If we can’t produce it in house, it doesn’t get produced.” We actually even republished an old story from the 1980s because it was worthy of being republished and it kept costs down. At the very beginning of the pandemic, in late March/early April 2020, I said that any expense over \$20 had to go through me personally. By anything, I meant anything. When a big advertiser made a large buy and the salesperson wanted to buy them a thank-you gift, she had to get my sign-off on a \$150 gift. That was one of the biggest approved expenses of the pandemic. (Cathy Merrill, *Washingtonian*)

Because none of the city magazines were willing to entertain pay-for-play editorial content, they all had to shrink their print circulations to account for the gap in doctor's offices canceling subscriptions, hotels canceling in-room copies, and the pulling of other verified copies from newsstand shelves. As a result, all eight magazine editors interviewed said that their print frequency shrank. Some combined issues and went down to 10 per year (they were 12 times before the pandemic) while others like *Seattle Met* was forced to take more drastic measures. According to Editor-in-Chief Angela Cabotaje, the print publication shifted to a quarterly publication.

At least five of the editors interviews said they were tasked with trying to come up with ways to fill the circulation gap created by COVID. In Madison, Wisconsin, Editor-in-Chief Andrea Behling was facing a dilemma: *Madison* magazine lost 1000 subscribers when the doctor's offices and hotels stopped carrying copies because of the idea of multiple touches per copy. That accounted for 10% of their circulation, which is almost too big of a hit to absorb and stay in business. She came up with an innovative idea to grow circulation and readership: For the last 13 years, the first Friday in March is National Unplug Day (Jennings 2022). Behling capitalized on the momentum of many people already working from home and now being asked to not use any devices. *Madison* magazine started a campaign called "unplug week," where they used a lot of push advertising to ask residents to subscribe to *Madison* magazine at a discounted rate and read it that week rather than read stories on their devices. It worked: They made back the 1000 lost subscriptions, and a year later by March 2021, they added back their doctors' and professional offices. As a result, the pandemic netted them a 10% circulation increase.

We were able to do this by identifying people on staff, including writers and editors who usually have nothing to do with readership or circulation, and have them help sell subscriptions. It was a coalition of the willing. It was hugely successful because we convinced people to disconnect from their devices and reconnect with their city. (Andrea Behling, *Madison magazine*)

A pattern that emerged from interviewing the editors was that while none of them sold editorial content to make ends meet, and while all of them had to shrink circulation and magazine frequency, none of them would accept the concept of failure. Moreover, all of them demonstrated the same resilience—embodying the characteristics of the Hierarchy of Influences theory (Reese 2019; Baran and David 2012)—that magazines were forced to demonstrate in 1999 during the dot.com boom; in 2008 during the recession; and in 2014 when the push to move print online as a cost saver hit a fevered pitch. Although COVID has not entirely ceased to be an issue for society and economy, from an advertising perspective, the numbers are on the uptick and the editors believe the worst is behind them, thereby believing that their teams can survive any other financial catastrophe that occurs as a result of the pandemic's aftermath.

### ***Perceived Long-Term Effects of the Pandemic on City Magazines Editorial Direction***

City magazines weren't immune from the terror everyone felt in the early stages of the pandemic, when the media, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the WHO were advising everyone to stay home unless it was absolutely necessary to go outside. The CDC and the WHO also said in March-July 2020 that if it was absolutely

necessary to go outside, then you were to cover exposed skin—especially your orifices—and then wipe down your clothes with Lysol or Clorox wipes (Huang 2020). City and regional magazines did, however, have to contemplate the long-term effects that the pandemic would have not just on their editorial coverage, but on the magazine's livelihood as a whole. After all, magazine production is a team effort, and it is hard to produce a magazine when everyone is remote. The editors, forced to pivot and be flexible in these unprecedented times, also had to be fortunetellers and predict the long-term effects of the pandemic on their publications. On this point, almost all of the editors ( $n = 7$ ) thought that the editorial coverage of COVID was here to stay, and as a dominant part of magazine coverage, at least for the foreseeable future. Brian Howard, editor-in-chief of *Philadelphia* magazine, began to see his role not just as a journalist, but as a cheerleader for his city.

We are a magazine that, among our missions, is telling people what to go out and do and spend their money on, and then all of a sudden, we weren't supposed to do that. The days of all of us working collaboratively in the same office space, I suspect, are gone. Not just because of the pandemic, but now we showed people that we can do the work from home on our own, so there isn't really a need to be in an office all day. There'll likely be a hybrid model, but I don't see us filling this office all day every day again. ... But long term, we have to make sure that whatever our coverage, we have to watch out that we don't advise people to do things that are unsafe. We just don't know what unsafe means from day to day anymore. (Brian Howard, *Philadelphia* magazine)

This sentiment, reiterated by six other editors and an editorial director, like Cathy Merrill at *Washingtonian*, exposed another pattern of city/regional magazine editorial behavior in the wake of COVID: not knowing what the future will hold but being prepared for anything. Regardless of how well operations are running, the abruptness of COVID demonstrated that editors and management have to be on high alert at all times. "I feel like I need to give the long-term effects more thought, but we got caught up in the day-to-day triage in the heat of the pandemic," Merrill said.

My concern is that being out of the office so much and not having the comradery of working together, which is part of why there was the Great Resignation nationwide, will lead to staff leaving. Or maybe the economic fallout will lead to a recession? I know that I hope a long-term effect of COVID and not being in the office as often isn't staff turnover. We are hiring for a lot of positions right now, illustrating our commitment to our mission and our product. I hope it stays that way. (Cathy Merrill, *Washingtonian*)

Then there is Max Weiss at *Baltimore* magazine, who has full-blown COVID fatigue. "I've put the kibosh on talking about a Zoom interview in the lead [of stories]," she said. "I've also made an edict that you're not allowed to use the phrase 'unprecedented times' or 'there's a light at the end of the tunnel,' or any other COVID cliché anymore."

### ***City Magazines' Roles in Aiding the City's Recovery from Pandemic***

Since all eight editors in their mission statements suggested that the role of the city/regional magazine was too inform and entertain while keep a finger on the city's collective pulse, they naturally believed that their publications play a role—and will play a role in perpetuity—in aiding their city's recovery measures. Yet the twin roles that *Texas*

*Monthly* editor Dan Goodgame described in answering research question 5 (RQ 5) represent the mission and direction that all eight editors said they are taking.

I'd say we have two roles: One is simply to cover the recovery as rigorously as we covered the pandemic and the measures taken to deal with it. In the case of Texas, the recovery measures effect the economy, politics, our healthcare institutions and so on, so we need to continue to rigorously cover the recovery. Second: we need to set a good example in our own offices of how we respond to recovery measures and to practice good journalism in a safe way that can be appreciated by our readers and modeled by our peers. (Dan Goodgame, *Texas Monthly*)

*Texas Monthly* has long been a journalistic standard-bearer for city and regional magazines, and has been an annual placeholder on the winner's podium ever since former Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism Dean Nicholas Lemann was an editor in 1978 (Lemann 2022). In 2021 alone, *Texas Monthly* won five National Magazine Awards and nine CRMAs (Texas Monthly 2021). According to several of the editors that were interviewed for this research (including Chris Vogel from *Boston* magazine, which is another perennial CRMA winner and Vogel is one of the universally celebrated city magazine editors), *Texas Monthly* is an outlier because of how well they have always performed, and because they have a staff that's as big as some national magazines. So goes the direction of *Texas Monthly*, so goes a majority of the legacy print city magazines, as many of them are quick to mimic *Texas Monthly* innovation. But Vogel also espoused a role that *Boston* magazine—a storied title in its own right (and the oldest of all the CRMAs)—will tout in the recovery effort of the city.

Our promise to the readers is—to bottom-line the hell out of it—to increase the joy of living in Boston. Our goal is to allow readers to feel in-the-know about what's happening in their city and to have a general understanding of the zeitgeist. I like the idea of facilitating a love affair with our city. So pandemic or not, our role is to make our readers feel comfortable in the city. And try though it did, the pandemic didn't diminish that, so our role in aiding the recovery is to make sure people are aware of what's happening around them, and for us to present the information in a way that's comforting and familiar. (Chris Vogel, *Boston* magazine)

Moving forward, regardless of whether another wave of COVID spikes and irrespective of whether the government or schools mandate closures or mandatory masks, the city/regional magazines have learned to fight through the worst of times and going forward, not be as alarmist as cable news and legacy print newspapers were in the beginning. The city/regional magazines look to embrace their benefit of a longer lead-time to make sure they put forth a current, reasoned reflection of the condition of their cities.

## Discussion and Conclusion

COVID took the whole world by storm and made for a never-ending topic for hard news media. City magazines, however—not used to chasing a daily deadline—faced a precarious predicament, especially in the early days of COVID. How were lifestyle magazines supposed to survive when there was no lifestyle to cover? This study uncovered five phenomena addressing city and regional magazine in the face of COVID. In the process of uncovering the phenomena, this study highlighted the resilience of city and regional magazines when it came to covering the lifestyle news of a city in the worst of conditions, and about tenacity in general.



The first phenomenon was that even though COVID dismembered the bread-and-butter editorial subjects that city magazines are known for (restaurant review, real estate, festivals and activities) grounded theory and the Hierarchy of Influences helped draw out the fact that the cities needed the city magazines as much as the magazines needed the city readership. According to the editors of the magazines interviewed, they were the first media outlets to document take-out dining during the 2020 lockdown. According to the editors, city and regional magazines were also the first media to do in-depth lengthy profiles of the state-appointed “essential workers” that were ordered to work to keep the city’s running. The writers and editors who became accustomed to three-month lead times and softer features were once again doing shoe-leather reporting and using methods seldom if ever used to obtain their interview and information, and all eight editors boasted about how their teams rose to the occasion.

The second phenomenon was that city magazines had to completely restructure how they covered their topics (no more restaurant reviews, for instance, but highlighting restaurants that were open for take-out and delivery) and how they were reported. Editors had to jump in and help with the writing because of layoffs and furloughs (at all magazines except the *Washingtonian* and *Texas Monthly*). They also had to find lifestyle activities for people that were supposed to stay indoors and were expected to social distance when they did go out, so city magazines actually sent their readers outside of their cities on road trips, putting the readers first and honoring their trust and faith in the magazine to provide them lifestyle entertainment.

The third phenomenon was how the magazines all had to shrink their print sizes because a lot of their advertising and subscriptions dried up. Even in the darkest days of the pandemic, however, not a single magazine deviated from its church-and-state editorial/advertising agreement, and none of the editorial content was for sale. Nevertheless, the editors worked outside their job descriptions and found ways to attract a new online and subscription readership while their waiting room, hotel room, and newsstand presence circulations shrank.

The fourth phenomenon was that all city magazine editors said they would from now on pay additional attention to the ordinary citizenry and include first responders, educators, restaurant workers, truck drivers, and other people who do not historically attract feature-length narrative coverage in their content. They will also have backup evergreen content ready and waiting in the wings in case they have to stop the presses and cancel all of their event coverage should the pandemic rear back up.

The fifth phenomenon is how every city magazine feels that they either play a role or are playing a role in their city’s recovery, and that they need to lead by example of how workplaces should implement safety measures and how reporters and writers can do their jobs over Zoom, email, through a mask, or even yelling questions from the street to someone standing on a porch. This last point of ensuring workplace safety is particularly important—and difficult, because magazine newsrooms are the living embodiment of a fluid, productive team environment. So many other institutions put their bottom lines first during the pandemic and failed their customers and employees in the process (Olivares 2022). The editors of these magazines do not want to find themselves lacking the confidence of their employees and their city like has happened in other industries (Vasquez 2021).

The Hierarchy of Influences model helps to explain these phenomena and the different levels of influence that shape content and editorial direction in city and regional

magazines during the unprecedented time of COVID in the United States. Content production was influenced by five component levels as spelled out by Reese (2019). These are the (1) individual, (2) media routine, (3) organizational, (4) social institutional, and (5) social system. At the center of the Hierarchy of Influence is the individual level (Reese 2019). The content of city and regional magazines is determined by editors, each of whom has his or her point of view that is influenced by their individualized beliefs and values.

Beyond the individual level, editors are affected by the local/regional environment of their work, which permeates their news values, news judgment, and objectivity (Reese 2019). The organizational level described in the Hierarchy of Influences occurs at city and regional magazines that have their own policies, motives, political interest, and economic imperatives (Reese 2019). This level captures the influences attributable to media organizations and relationships with other institutions and with the environment at large. Moreover, city and regional magazines developed an emotional turn, which led to a change in the role of emotion in the production and creation of the journalistic product they created (Wahl-Jorgensen 2020).

Straightening out pandemic-related information that circulates in the community through the role of city and regional magazines is the urgent aim of this study (Satriani, Permatasari, and Firmansyah 2022).

Based on these phenomena, future research should be conducted to see whether the patterns exposed in this research by the top city and regional magazines are gaining traction and being distributed to other magazines across industry. In order to triangulate the phenomena, quantitative research with surveys might be worth conducting with the editors of other city and regional magazines. Additionally, as this research focused on the editorial content and interviews with the editors-in-chief, a similar study with the publishers of the city/regional magazines about how they fared during COVID would yield important and beneficial information about the financial mosaic.

## Limitations

Although the researcher made three opportunities to contact all of the editors appearing on the list of CRMA's 2021 finalists, the researcher would like to have interviewed more voices for the research. Time was of the essence because of publishing deadlines (both for the CRM editors as well as the author of this paper), so the researcher went with the data in-hand, which was significant because saturation was met in the responses of the editors to the research questions.

Because the consensus of the responding editors was similar in nature, a further study—picking up where this one left off—that examines consensual news values/journalistic routines of city/regional magazine editors in the time of COVID would help to explain how these editors came to the same conclusion of how to steer their magazines—successfully to boot—out of the fate befalling other publications in the time of COVID.

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## ORCID

Adam Pitluk  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9086-0578>

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