How to self-publish an online magazine

Parry publishing pitfalls on a bread-and-butter budget

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Contents

Who this guide is for

If you want to self-publish an online magazine all by yourself, this is your lucky day. Here, you will learn how to create a magazine, avoid some publishing pitfalls, follow some time-tested tips, and send your creation online for the world to enjoy.

If you're a big-time magazine editor who's in charge of platoons of artists, designers and writers, then good job! Give yourself a pat on the back. Get yourself a glass of iced lemon tea (or whatever your favourite beverage is).

Hi, I'm Vincent, and I publish an online monthly magazine *Singularity* for curious artists and intellectuals. For the most part, I'm the only one doing everything. I'm the editor, photographer, writer, designer and whatever role a magazine requires to make it happen. I will teach you how to publish an online magazine on your own. Don't worry, it's easy.

You don't need to be an expert in the publishing industry (magazine, newspaper, blog or otherwise). You don't need expensive tools. You just need a computer with an Internet connection. If you're reading this, you probably already have that. Yay!

This guide is concerned with publishing an *online* magazine, as opposed to an offline or print magazine. In fact, the final product is an Adobe PDF file.

It took me exactly 10 days to publish the first issue of my magazine, from concept idea to PDF file. My goal is to get you to publish one issue of your magazine. Trust me, it gets easier to publish the next issue.

Getting started

If you haven't already done so, decide what the magazine is about. What are the topics? What excites you? What excites your readers?

While we're on that subject, decide who your readers are (also known as your target audience). Let's say your magazine is about mountain hiking. Then your readers are probably mountain hikers! Yay, that was easy.

Typically, you also belong to your group of readers. In fact, you're the ideal and/or typical reader of that group. There are 2 schools of thought on that. Some people say you should write for your readers. Some people say you should write for yourself.

I'm of the latter group; I believe you should write about topics that you find interesting and exciting. The idea is that you will attract readers who have similar tastes. Don't just write stuff that your readers want to read. Write stuff that your readers *should* read. Be a leader, not a coddler.

Besides, you're the only one working on this magazine. You might as well write about something you like.

Next, decide the frequency. How often is your magazine published? Weekly? Fortnightly? Monthly? I don't recommend quarterly (once every 3 months) or yearly publishing schedules. The magazine issues will be too far apart for your readers to remember you (if your magazine is the sole source of contact) and gain traction.

The frequency depends largely on your motivation to keep at a consistent schedule. Remember, you're the only one working on this. I suggest a monthly publishing schedule to start off.

Online versus offline

The final fruit of your labour when you follow this guide is a computer file. I suggest the Adobe PDF file format because it works across a wide range of operating systems.

So why not an offline print magazine? Because it's cheaper and faster to get your magazine issues out to your readers. Plus it saves trees, since there's no actual printing involved on your part (but your readers are welcome to print out their copy of your magazine).

This saves a lot of headaches on your part because you don't have to deal with distributors, printers and other middlemen.

If somewhere down the road, you decide you also want a printed version of your magazine, then the knowledge you get from this guide still applies. You still need to create something for your printer company to print, right?

Web page versus file download

"Can't I just write to my blog? Why do I need to create a PDF file?"

Yes, you can write to a blog. Each article can be a single blog post. There are several blogging software which makes it easy for you to publish articles (WordPress being one of the popular ones). There are even free

themes that you can apply to your blog so you don't have to muck around with HTML, CSS or even Javascript to get a beautiful website. Don't worry if you don't know what HTML, CSS or Javascript is. This is the last you'll hear of them.

But a magazine should have design flexibility. A website or blog conforms to some standard template look for consistency, and requires some effort to break that consistency if you so choose.

A magazine in a (PDF) file allows an easier break. If you want an article to look different, just style it differently. And other articles in the magazine issue aren't affected. More importantly, other articles in *other* magazine issues aren't affected because each issue is a separate file.

And you can let your creativity run wild on the design. Each and every page can be different! But I strongly suggest not to. It saves headaches.

"Wouldn't a URL link be easier to share than a PDF file?"

I'm assuming that in this case, you're giving your magazine away for free. Well, that depends. Facebook and Twitter makes it easy to share links. You can send a URL link in an email, and not attach a file.

But think about retention. Your reader clicks on a link to your magazine article on your website or blog. He finds it interesting, and bookmarks the URL. Maybe even share the link with his friends.

A PDF file on the other hand, stays on your reader's computer. Your reader "owns" a copy of the magazine, and not just a link to somewhere in the wide world of the web. And there's a permanent nature to it. Once a file is downloaded to your reader's computer, that's how it looks like. Your reader won't have to worry about the website or blog being down, or that the article was changed by the writer (that's you).

"Wouldn't web pages have better SEO? A PDF file means Google can't see it."

Woah, you know about SEO! As far as search engine optimisation go, yes, web pages of your magazine will be easier found by search engines such as Google and Bing. However, from my experience, the PDFs stored on my blog get discovered by other websites looking for freely downloadable PDFs anyway. It's a roundabout way, and my blog might not be listed as the source, but the search engines will eventually find them.

"What!?! I'm not even listed as the original creator of the magazine?"

Oh hold on to your pants. As far as website scraping and PDF piracy is concerned, assume it will be done anyway, no matter what safeguards you put in place. The key is to make your magazine identifiable with you even when pirated or stolen. There are a couple of ways to do so, and you'll find out as you read on.

"Can't I use one of those magazine publishing websites?"

Of course. You will also learn that they require you to upload a computer file, say a Microsoft Word or Adobe PDF file. And you're back to square one. You still need to create that file in the first place.

Sure, that magazine website shows your magazine in a nice user interface, complete with zooming and page flipping animations. You should also know that they basically own your magazine.

Where do readers go to read your magazine? Their website. What's the link you will use to spread the word about your magazine? A URL on their website. What will your readers see while reading your magazine? Their website displaying your magazine.

What about your brand?

There are advantages to using those websites. They usually have social interaction built in; readers can share issues, articles and talk among each other. There's the nice user interface I mentioned earlier. And the website will have a huge readership base, so your magazine can be discovered by new readers easily.

So in case you want to check out those sites, here are a few:

- pressmart.com
- issuu.com
- yudu.com
- calameo.com
- scribd.com
- openzine.com

Understand they might charge you for the service. Read through their terms and conditions carefully.

Charging for your magazine

You want to make money from your magazine. So do I. From my magazine, that is, not from yours.

Some of the magazine publishing websites mentioned before allows you to charge readers, and the feature is built in. Some allows you to put in advertisements selected by them. Pressmart does both.

If you're doing it alone (like I did), you can use e-junkie.com to host your magazine file. As of this writing, it's US$ 5 per month to host 10 products. Meaning you can sell 10 issues of your magazine before you need to upgrade to a higher level plan. The website offers secure file downloading (so people can't rip you off), easy management interface and integration with PayPal for online payments.

There's another digital product host called clickbank.com, but the focus is more on affiliate marketing. What's affiliate marketing? Well it's out of scope for this guide. I can't teach you everything under the sun in just one guide, you know. Basically you're selling other people's products for a commission.

Another website with similar services is 1shoppingcart.com. I think that's a little too expensive and high-end for our purposes. Just letting you know your options.

If you want to use an ecommerce shopping cart available with web hosting, that's fine too. I just find it easier to use a third party ecommerce software.

I stopped charging for my magazine because I felt it hurt my readership. Your mileage may vary.

What you need

- web hosting and domain name
- FTP software
- word processor
- image editor
- camera or camera phone

Web hosting and domain name

You're going to need a place to store your magazine online. A website or blog of your own is the ideal, since you have the most control and you can market your magazine however you want. And a domain name (such as awesomemagazine.com) is better for establishing a brand image.

I use Lunarpages (lunarpages.com) and A2 Hosting (a2hosting.com). They also make it easy for you to register a domain name. If you are paranoid and/or a control freak, you can also manage your own domain name using an account with a domain registrar.

You can get good hosting solutions for about US$ 5 per month, and the domain name is around US$ 10 per year. Know that web hosts typically ask for an upfront 2 year plan, so you could be paying US$ 140 (US$ 5 * 24 months, and 2 years of holding the domain name) at one go.

If you're going for the free route, I suggest WordPress.com, which offers a blogging solution as well as a small web hosting solution. Don't mix that up with wordpress.org, which offers the blogging software to install when you have your own website.

FTP software

You also need an FTP software to upload your magazine files. I use SmartFTP, which is really easy to use. You can also use FileZilla, a free FTP software.

Your web host might have a user interface for you to upload files. But I still suggest you get an FTP software. It makes your life a lot easier.

Word processor

I use Microsoft Word 2007 together with the Save As PDF or XPS Microsoft Office add-in. You will most likely already have your own favourite word processor. Just make sure you can export or save as a PDF file.

You can also download a free word processor from OpenOffice.

Of course, if you happen to have Adobe Acrobat, you can write directly into a PDF file.

Image editor

Although it's not strictly necessary, your magazine is going to look very bland if there is only text. Even if you're highly creative and can do all sorts of textual acrobatics with fonts, highlights, bolds, italics and text colours. Unless of course, that's the point of your magazine.

Your computer will most likely come with a basic image editor. Windows comes with the Paint program. Don't dismiss it, the Paint program that's in Windows 7 can still create interesting graphics (the calligraphic pen tool has interesting applications...).

I use Paint.NET, a free image editor. It has no relation to the Windows Paint program (that I know of). The .NET part is because it runs on the .NET Framework (which you don't really need to know if you're not a programmer). It has layers capabilities, lots of image effects and has

support for plugins (in case you need an effect that doesn't come in the default installation). But you're welcome to use very expensive Photoshop if you want.

Camera or camera phone

This is also not strictly necessary, but it's an easy way of getting pictures. You don't need to be an expert photographer. Later on, I'll give you some tips. Just don't expect jaw-droppingly awesome photos every time with basic equipment and knowledge.

My iPhone 3G takes pictures just fine (despite whatever you've heard about its low quality or low resolution or whatever), so you don't need an expensive camera too. I'm of the belief that it's the person, not the tool, that determines the basic quality of the photo. And if my photos don't turn out well as it was shot, I just use the image editor to fix minor issues.

I take lots of photos of skies, clouds and trees (because they don't complain or demand payment as photo subjects). Even if I don't use them, I just take them to stay in practice. And you never know, some day in the future, you might decide you need a picture that luckily enough, you've taken a photo of.

Remember, you're the only one doing this. You might not have time or energy to take photos of the subject you had in mind, and do it in time for your next magazine issue.

Design skills? Keep it simple.

If you're feeling sorry for yourself because you're comparing your magazine with the likes of *Men's Health*, *Forbes* or *National Geographic*, I want you to stop it right now. I said *right now*.

I understand what you're going through. Those magazines are so colourful, so beautifully designed, so many articles, so many product placement ads, so many readers...

Keep in mind that those magazines are backed by platoons of staff (chief editors, art directors, sales managers, customer service, writers, photographers). Don't sweat it. Just keep your magazine design simple.

Here are some guidelines:

2 main colours

Maybe 3 main colours. And no more. The colour scheme will depend on your magazine subject. What kind of feeling do you want your readers to experience? You can search online for "colour themes" for ideas.

For example, for our hypothetical magazine on mountain hiking, an earthy feel is appropriate. Let's choose brown and green as the main colours. These colours will be used throughout the magazine as the header or subheader text colour, as background colour and so on.

You can use more colours that are shades of the main colours. For example, light brown or dark green.

2 different fonts

Or at most 3 different fonts. Don't go crazy using 10 different fonts.

Because this will be an online magazine, to be read online, I suggest using a sans serif font for the text, and a serif font for the headlines. A serif font has some decorative lines at the upper and/or lower ends of the letters. A sans serif font doesn't have those lines.

For example, Arial and Calibri are sans serif fonts, and Times New Roman and Palatino Linotype are serif fonts.

Now a serif font is typically easier to read, if you're reading print publications such as newspapers, magazines and books. The decorative lines of the font make it easier to recognise letters bunched together as words. A sans serif font is then used as the headline font for contrast.

When you're online, it's reversed. You're basically reading off a projector screen, with the light shining directly into your eyes. "Cleaner" letters make it easier on the eye.

And a computer screen is made up of pixels, unlike a newspaper or print magazine which has infinite resolution. At small font sizes, a serif font might not render well.

So regardless of the fonts you use, choose a large enough size so it's easy to read. Even if your readers are young with perfect eyesight.

Arial
Calibri

Times
Palatino

Sans serif and serif fonts. In large font sizes so you don't have to squint.

Text layout

I suggest a 2 column grid with a landscape orientation.

Why landscape and not portrait orientation? Because it's an online publication. A portrait orientation makes it hard to show an entire page on the screen, unless you shrink it to fit. Then the font will be really terribly small. If you don't shrink the page to fit the screen, you'll have to scroll up and down to read the text. Your readers are already scrolling to read pages backwards and forwards. Don't make them do more. A landscape orientation is a better choice.

Since it's now wider than it is tall, split the text into 2 columns. Then your readers' eyes don't have to run a visual marathon from the end of the line to the start of the next line. This is why newspapers and print magazines separate the material into many columns. It's easier to read in chunks when there are only 7 words in a line.

You can also go for a 3 column layout. I just find a 2 column layout good enough. As a rough guideline, each line of text with about 10 to 15 words per line is fine.

Magazine sections

Here are a few sections typically found in magazines. The bare minimum you should have is the cover page and the articles. There is no specific order, but use your common sense. The contents page won't be useful if it's at the end of the magazine...

Cover page

It's typically an image filling the entire page. It's the first thing a reader will see, so something interesting or eye-catching is recommended. The image could be something related to a cover story you're writing.

Your magazine title is also on it. Choose a nice distinctive font for it, because it's going to stay branded in your readers' minds. And you don't have to count this font in your selection of 2 main fonts. Your magazine title is special.

You might also want to put the magazine issue number or month on it. Maybe add a couple of choice quotes from the articles within.

If you're not sure what to put, just browse the magazine racks and look at their covers for ideas. Alright, those magazines are successful. I get it. I said wipe that dejected look off your face, didn't I?

Contents page

A contents page shows your readers what that particular magazine issue has to offer at a glance.

I didn't put one for my early issues because I thought there were only a few articles. My readers just needed to flip the pages quickly to find out what's in store. Then I realised a contents page does more than tell the

page number for an article. It's a quick glimpse of the whole magazine issue. Just put one for your magazine, ok?

Editor's note

Or "From the editor" or "The Editor's letter" or some variant. Basically, it's something specific that *you* want to say to your readers. I'm assuming you're the editor (and the photographer and designer and...).

Maybe you want to write about the current issue's theme (if there's one). Or maybe a little bit about the cover story. Or maybe some significant event in your magazine's industry. Or maybe what you had for breakfast that day. It's up to you.

Readers' letters

Quite self-explanatory. Publishing your readers feedback and letters (make sure you have permission) and answering them in the magazine is another way of adding content. It shows you're listening to them (and signals to magazine browsers that hey, there are people reading this magazine!).

But it's ok if you don't get letters from readers (electronic or otherwise). Just keep at it. Send a copy of your magazine to me. *I'll* send you some feedback.

Articles

Normal articles, feature articles, cover stories. This is the meat of your magazine. It doesn't have to be all words. Some magazines have nothing but pictures (home furnishing magazines come to mind).

Advertisements

Information about products and services of other people or companies. Maybe even about your own products and services.

Don't get hung up on it if you don't get any advertisement placements from others. An advertisement is there to make something known. You can use it to let your readers know about your friend's garage sale for instance. Or about your son's violin recital at the communal centre. Or about a fun family event put up by your church in the park.

It's *your* magazine. Do whatever you want with it.

Credits

If you're the only one working on the magazine, there's really no point in having a credits and contributions page. But if you do have input from other people, put their names somewhere and what their contribution is. Don't be a jerk.

Maybe you have a friend who lets you use some of her photographs. Maybe you hire a couple of writers. Put their names down.

Design techniques

I don't know everything there is about magazines and print business, but I can share some information, tips and tricks.

Bleeding images

An image is said to bleed if it reaches the page borders. Your cover image should bleed.

Image fits within page

Image fills entire page

Image bleeding

If your word processor doesn't have an easy way to do this, try setting the margins to zero, and ignore any errors about printing (normal printers can't print anything at the paper edges).

Basic image editing tips

There are some quick tips you can do to make your images look better. Or even artistic.

1) **Cropping** – it means cut your image to only the subject matter you want. You don't need to use the entire photo for instance. If you just want the man and woman in the picture, cut out more of the pixels surrounding them so they are more in focus.
2) **Noise reduction** – sometimes when you take a photo, of the sky for instance, there might be specks of colour among the blue, even though you are certain it's a clear blue sky. It happens with my iPhone photos anyway. If your image editor has the function, learn to use it to clean up your photos (Paint.NET has it).
3) **Brightness and contrast** – despite your efforts, sometimes the lighting doesn't do your photos justice. Or you don't have control over the lighting. Or you're a beginner (like me) who don't want to be bothered with tinkering with all the settings. You might be able to correct the photo by brightening or darkening it.

There are other techniques you can try, but it depends on the image editor you're using. Try playing around with the hue/saturation settings or making the image black and white. You might be surprised at the results.

Learn to frame your camera shot

The most important thing I learnt about taking photos is to frame the shot. Make sure you choose a view that makes the subject of your shot more interesting. As a rule of thumb, don't put your subject in dead centre.

Divide your shot invisibly into 9 rectangles. Try framing your subject in the outer rectangles. It makes the viewer ask questions. Why is it down there? Is there anything interesting up there off the screen? Why did the photographer use so much "blank" space?

Making your reader ask questions makes the image more interesting.
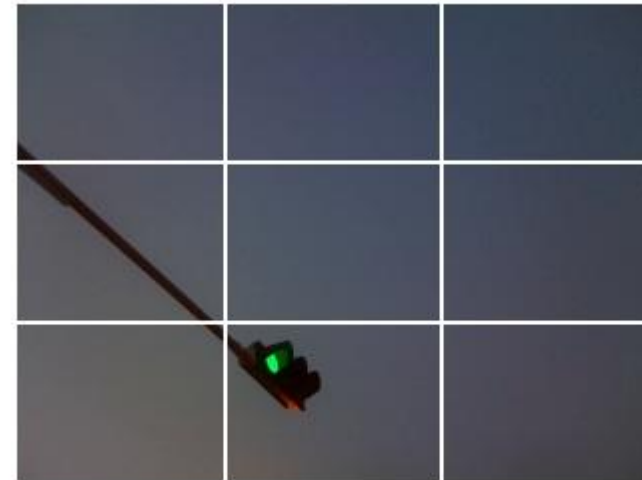
Images are usually more interesting when the subject is off-centre

Warm and cool colours

Generally speaking, reds, oranges and yellows are warm colours. Greens, blues and purples are cool colours. Anything coloured in a warm colour will look like it's near to the viewer. Anything in a cool colour will look like it's further away from the viewer.

Use this to your advantage.

There's more to colour theory, but we want to concentrate on creating your magazine.

Leading

It's pronounced "ledding". It's the amount of white space between lines of text. Make sure there's enough so the lines of text are far apart enough for pleasant reading. Usually the default settings in your word processor should be good enough.

The more important point is that for your headings and subheadings, make sure the heading text is closer to what it's describing. For example, the subheading "Leading" for this part is closer to this part than the text from the part before. This makes it easier for the reader to associate "Leading" with the closer chunk of text.

Left-justify your text

It's easier to read if the start of the line always starts at the same position on the left, assuming you're writing in a language that's left-to-right. Don't right-justify your normal text (artistic reasons are excusable), because it's harder to read.

I also suggest not justifying your text, meaning the left and right side of the line always starts and ends at the same position. This makes it likely that rivers are formed. What rivers, you ask?

Rivers

Rivers are blank spaces in between lines that form an invisible white line in the chunk of text.

This sentence shows what rivers are in a paragraph. That sentence shows what rivers are in a paragraph. Long sentences show what rivers are in a paragraph.

That's a trivial case (see that white line after the first word in each of the sentences?). But it also shows another thing you want to take note. Try not to have consecutive lines of text starting with the same words, because the sentences happen to work out that way. Use other words, because the sentences happen to look like they're the same.

See what happened there? Just rephrase the wording if it happens.

Widows and orphans

Oh stop crying, nobody's lost their husbands or parents. In our case, if on a new page or new column, there's only one line of text that continues from a previous page or column, that line is called a widow. If at the end of a page or column, there's only one line of text of the paragraph, that line is called an orphan.

Generally speaking, we want to avoid that. Your word processor might already have the default option to automatically avoid widows and orphans. In that case, skip to the next section.

Otherwise, you can manually insert line breaks to shift text around so there are no lonely lines at the start or end of the page. But you don't have to follow this if you don't want to. Just letting you know there's a term for it (I didn't know till I did research into newspapers and magazine printing).

Break up long passages of text into paragraphs

When your magazine is online, white space matters more. Readers' eyes can leap from one chunk of text to another. And they leap more frequently when encountering a long wall of text.

If you failed your English class back when you're young, and you don't know how to split text into paragraphs, I'll teach you an easy way to splitting.

Keep paragraphs between 3 to 5 sentences. Consider splitting when you have more than 5 sentences bunched together.

It's just a rule of thumb, but it might keep your readers interested in reading what's next.

Pull quotes

A pull quote is a small chunk of text from the main article, and is typically displayed in a larger font size. It is used to draw the reader's attention and visually break up the look.

Use a (short) sentence or phrase that highlights a particular point in the article, or is inspirational, or is particularly interesting.

"Draw the reader's attention and visually break up the look"

Psst. Don't tell anyone, but you can also use pull quotes to help in text alignment, such as correcting widows and orphans and other formatting foibles.

Curly quotes

Or smart quotes. They're quotation marks. Typically used for, you know, quotes. For example,

"My, my, isn't that a lovely umbrella?"

"Who are you calling 'fuddy duddy', you little pipsqueak?"

If you're on Windows, there's a shortcut to getting those 4 curly quotation marks. Your keyboard needs to have the numeric pad. Press

and hold the [Alt] button on your keyboard. Then type 0, 1, 4, 7, in that order on the *numeric pad*. You will get a nice curly left double quote "

Alt + 0147 gives ", the left double quote

Alt + 0148 gives ", the right double quote

Alt + 0145 gives ', the left single quote

Alt + 0146 gives ', the right single quote

Include the title of your magazine and the page number

It seems obvious but it needs to be said. You can make use of the page header and footer to include the information. The title of your magazine on every page helps with branding (make sure it's small enough so as not to be obnoxious, yet large enough to be read). And the page number is the only way your readers know where they are in the magazine.

Change layout formats to excite the visual senses

If you have the motivation to do it, change layout formats once in a while to break the monotony of your magazine's pages. For example, you use a 2 column layout, but start one article with a 3 column layout, and continue the rest of that article in the 2 column layout again. Or if you always have your images at the top, put them near the bottom of the page.

The idea is to present something fresh and new to your readers, even if it's not a big change.

But you don't have to change *everything*. Just make a small change here in this issue and there in the next issue. What do you mean you don't know if there's a next issue? *Of course* there's a next issue. Concentrate on getting your first issue out. Next issue, you'll have something to change with.

Anti-piracy

I will say this right now. If a person is motivated enough, that person will pirate and steal your magazine content somehow.

That said, there are 3 things you can do to make the would-be pirate's life more miserable:

- Develop your personal writing style. That's hard to get credit for.
- Put your magazine title and/or your URL on every page.
- Publicly announce and market your magazine everywhere you can. This makes it more likely that people associate the magazine with you (and not the pirate).

I suggest concentrating on making your existing readers happy and getting more readers. Pirates will pirate stuff that's worthwhile. You've got to get to that "worthwhile" stage first.

Save your styles

After you determine a particular look for a particular section of text that's always used, save that style. If you determined that your header text should be in Times New Roman at 16 point, bolded and in dark navy blue, save that style. Then you don't have to redo all the style settings every time you have a header text.

And if your word processor supports it (I highly suspect it does), if you want to change the look of the header text, just change the style, and all the header text will reflect the change.

I saved styles for my header text, subheaders, pull quotes, image caption text, page numbers on the contents page, article titles on the contents page and so on.

Publishing checklist

- Figure out your magazine's topics and readership
- Come up with a title (and a suitable font for it)
- Get a great-looking cover image. Put your title and issue number/month on it.
- Get some articles. Write them yourself or find someone to write them for you.
- To alleviate your stress or fear, keep the design simple. Use a 2 column layout, 1 sans serif font for the body text, 1 serif font for headers and subheaders.
- Save as or export to a PDF file.
- Upload to your website/blog or a magazine publishing site. Or upload to a third-party ecommerce site if you're selling it.
- Tell everyone you know your magazine is published.

And now you have your online magazine's very first issue. Get cracking. Your readers are waiting for you.