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Data and Culture, Over and Over. Preface

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Data and Culture, Over and Over

Preface

Eric Hoyt

Old movie magazines are alive. Their words and data are speaking to us again. Due to digitization projects and broader online access, as well as the curiosity and drive of researchers, historical film journals are experiencing a renaissance of interest and usage. Over the past few years, two significant anthologies have been published within this domain: *Mapping Movie Magazines: Digitization, Periodicals, and Cinema History* (Biltereyst and Van de Vijver 2020) and *Star Attractions: Twentieth-Century Movie Magazines and Global Fandom* (Jeffers McDonald and Lackman 2019). This special issue of *L'avventura*, along with the larger collaborative project, «Modes, Memories, and Cultures of Film Production in Italy (1949-1976)», marks another exciting step forward in taking film industry publications seriously. Rather than merely looking at trade papers and fan magazines as secondary sources, we can view the publications as primary sources: rich objects of study in their own right.

In my book, *Ink-Stained Hollywood: The Triumph of American Cinema's Trade Press*, I argued that the Hollywood trade papers actively participated in the creation and maintenance of industry cultures and communities, not merely as vehicles for disseminating the news (Hoyt 2022). Consider, for an example, an article announcing that a producer has acquired the rights to a story by a first-time screenwriter. Rather than simply conveying the news of another deal, the trade publication is serving an important legitimating and gatekeeping function. The producer belongs to the industry. And now, so too, does the screenwriter. Whether the movie ever gets made or not, something has already been produced: a sense of belonging to an industry and community. Interpreting the trade papers thus

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requires understanding the constituents of the industry and their norms, fears, and aspirations at particular moments in time.

By emphasizing the cultural and community functions of trade papers, I am not trying to suggest that they do not carry important information. They do. «From the postwar period onward, *Giornale dello Spettacolo* has kept researchers informed on the entertainment industry with data so granular that it has no equal across the rest of Europe», observes film historian Daniela Treveri Gennari in her chapter that is part of the forthcoming anthology, *Global Movie Magazine Networks*, co-edited by Kelley Conway and myself. Daniela Treveri Gennari's excellent chapter about *Giornale dello Spettacolo* analyzes the exhibitor-oriented trade paper for the vital role it played within the Italian film industry of the 1950s. The trade journal collected and published detailed box office figures, tracking both first and second run grosses across different pictures and cities. Yet it also included letters to the editor, editorials debating policies, and other features meant to reinforce a shared sense of community among Italian exhibitors (Treveri Gennari forthcoming). Data and culture were fused together in *Giornale dello Spettacolo*.

Additionally, the way in which industry quantitative data is presented conveys cultural meanings. Take, for example, an ordering of data we have all seen countless times: the weekly box office top 10 list. These lists inform, but they also play a scorekeeping function – tracking winners and losers – important for a showbusiness culture that values not simply success, but highly visible success. When collaborating on a research project with Derek Long, Kit Hughes, and Tony Tran, we found early precedents of scorekeeping within *Variety*, the most famous of all entertainment trade papers (Hoyt et al. 2020). Some of the most interesting scorekeeping tracked the competition among trade papers themselves. During the 1920s, as *Variety* pivoted toward covering the film industry in more depth, the paper published «Film Critics' Box Score[s]» that – taking inspiration from the statistical snapshots of baseball games – evaluated newspaper and trade paper reviewers for their abilities to predict hits and failures and ratio of criticism to praise. Not surprisingly, *Variety* came out as the winner. *Variety* was telling the industry that it was the trade paper that was most independent, best understood the marketplace, and possessed unparalleled taste. Over the following decade (the 1930s), *Variety* competed against *Motion Picture Herald* to be the first to report box office grosses at large downtown theaters across major American cities. In its efforts to win the race, *Variety* generated weekly estimates based on information it said it received about Friday's performances. The collection and sharing of data – the scorekeeping, in other words – had itself become a competition, based on speed and accuracy.

Fast forward a century. Digitization initiatives, such as the Media History Digital Library (<https://mediahist.org>) and «Modes, Memories, and Cultures of Film Production in Italy (1949-1976)» (<https://cineproduzione.uniud.it/>) are

turning these historic trade papers into new forms of data. The exact type of digital data produced will vary based on workflows, copyright arrangements, labor resources, and other factors. In most cases, however, the process of digitizing a magazine will entail: the creation of digital images of the individual pages (e.g., TIFFs, JPEGs); post-production of the images; the application of OCR (optical character recognition) to enable searchability; the creation of derivative files (e.g., PDF, TXT, XML); and the entry of key metadata fields to describe the item (e.g., «title», «date», etc.). In some cases, online collections have gone further by providing structure to quantitative data within the publications, so that they can be machine readable and actionable. Even in our current age of AI advancements, though, the human labor required for these additional steps is high. The trade-off inevitably becomes a question of granularity of metadata vs. quantity of output.

At the Media History Digital Library, we have moved overall in the direction of greater metadata granularity. We now catalog and upload magazines on the individual issue-level (e.g., March 23, 1931) rather than the volume level (e.g., January – June 1931). The issue-level approach makes it easier for users to sort results and quickly identify the correct date and citation information. However, we have not retroactively applied the issue-level cataloging to the earlier volumes we have scanned. Nor have we moved all the way to a page-level approach to cataloging, which would track article titles and authors, the presence of advertisements, the studio and film of the advertisements, and potentially dozens more metadata fields. While those page-level cataloging steps would add value to the user experience, the resources required to achieve them would consume all of our time and money, preventing us from scanning and adding new items to the collection – which we consider to ultimately be much more valuable for our users. As always, trade-offs.

As all of this reveals, a great deal of thought, consideration, and labor goes into the transformation of old magazines into new data. These digitization processes are embedded within institutional frameworks, cultural assumptions, and community expectations. One of our most central assumptions is about the importance of access – broad, online, and free for anyone to use. However, these assumptions are bound up in Western traditions, obscuring both indigenous protocols about knowledge (rooted in differing levels of access inside and outside of community) and uneven worldwide Internet connectivity (based on infrastructure, censorship, and state surveillance). As noted earlier, copyright laws play an important role in guiding digitization decisions. So too do ethical considerations. Should Italian and German magazines from the 1930s – no longer protected by copyright – be posted freely online without any restrictions or contextualization? Do they need some additional situating within digital environments due to the fascist political climates of their original creation? If so, what needs to be added, and how should this be accomplished within pre-existing database frameworks?

Other key ethical questions involve compensation and credit for those involved in the digitization process. At the Media History Digital Library, we pay graduate students for their time and expertise in scanning magazines and entering the necessary metadata; they are credited by name on our website. Other institutions take different approaches. From my experience, the best work gets done when those involved are paid fairly and feel personally invested.

Perhaps above all, the core community value toward which large-scale open access digitization and research initiatives aspire is that of respectful collaboration. «Modes, Memories, and Cultures of Film Production in Italy (1949-1976)» is a model of such collaboration, with researchers at different career stages working across several different institutions. The Media History Digital Library would not exist without such collaborations and the generosity of collection donors, funding sponsors, and partner institutions, such as the Library of Congress and Museum of Modern Art Library. Over the past three years, the Media History Digital Library has been able to add digitized volumes of *Cinema Illustrazione*, *La Critica Cinematografica*, and *Film d'oggi* as part of our ACLS Digital Extension Grant. The Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (CSC) generously shared scans of these magazines with us, and our funded graduate students worked on the post-production and cataloging. It is also worth noting that the MHDL collaboration with the CSC only emerged because Daniela Treveri Gennari, who had histories of working with both organizations, brought us together. Film scholars have a vital role to play in the creation and success of such collaborations.

Historians of movie magazines have called our attention to these publications' materiality and the many hands that touched a given issue (Polley 2019; Slide 2010). The journey of a Hollywood fan magazine issue might move from publisher to distributor, from distributor to retailer, from retailer to purchaser, from that purchaser to the next fan who read it, to the next, to the next, and then – in some special instances – all the way into the collections of libraries and archives, making them available to new generations. Of course, that same journey ended in a trash bin most of the time. But some magazine issues survived, and those are what we are now digitizing. As we do so, let us acknowledge and celebrate the many hands and people that make it possible to share them, and continue to touch them, now in digital form.

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