



An Information Management tool for the Dismantling of Internal Barriers in Expanding and Internationalising Companies: The Staff Magazine in Britain before the First World War

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Staff magazines were born in the decades immediately preceding the First World War. They were the product of corporate growth, the increasing internationalisation of corporate activities, improving literacy rates and the expansion of popular publishing and reading. They were also part of the information management revolution that swept through organisations in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

Staff magazines were organs of companies and other organisations that were internally edited for consumption by employees. Most were funded by the organisation itself and directed by approved editors, but a small minority owed their existence to autonomous staff associations. Staff magazines appeared in a wide variety of workplaces, although a core readership became the burgeoning mass of white-collar workers that characterised a maturing industrial economy. Magazines were relatively inexpensive, reflecting both the rise of popular reading and the sense of urgency that surrounded the need to improve efficiency through the considered management of information in organisations.

The early staff magazine was conceptualised as a handbook of information, a new medium containing material that ranged from the digestible and the light-hearted to the serious and the literary. They displayed a high degree of 'internal specialisation': content could be eclectic, with articles and sections on topics such as: news about an organisation's technical and administrative developments; wider, yet impinging, economic, political, scientific and industrial issues; recollections of working lives; short stories; hobbies; work undertaken in different departments; and reports by staff on their holiday adventures.

This paper's primary lens of analysis is that of information management. Staff magazines began to appear at the time they did because their instigators viewed them as a kind 'information glue' in organisations that across society and the economy were becoming larger and thus more fragmented, thereby requiring new ways - 'informational' ways - of managing them. The revolution in pre-computer information management beginning in the late-nineteenth century was a major driver of the medium of the staff magazine. The new techniques and technologies of this revolution were a response to the growing size and complexity of organisations and their operations.

Against a backdrop of increasingly hostile international markets, in-house journalism was seen as a new and useful instrument of business leadership in the struggle to bridge gaps in internal communications, combat the effects of increasing intensity of work, reduce alienation and ameliorate specialisation - all of which had been exacerbated by corporate enlargement and the changing structure of industries and services. At a time when production and the workplace were being subjected to streamlining, rationalisation and new scientific methods of management, the staff magazine offered explanations of these changes as well as strategies for coping with them. They helped disseminate messages from management that attempted not only to motivate and rally staff and humanize the organisation, but also inform and educate the workforce in a way that in today's



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lexicon would be defined as 'organisational learning'. The latter was also enhanced by the role played by the staff magazine as an aid to the corporate memory, in terms not only of the historical material that was often published but also the realisation that what was being published would serve in the future as a record that would help managers in their shaping of strategy, decision-making, organisational culture and corporate historical identity.

Biography

Alistair Black has been a full Professor in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA since January 2009, having previously taught and researched for 19 years at Leeds Metropolitan University, UK. He is author of the following books: *A New History of the English Public Library* (1996); *Understanding Community Librarianship* (1997 - with Dave Muddiman); *The Public Library in Britain 1914-2000* (2000); *The Early Information Society in Britain, 1900-1960* (2007 - with Dave Muddiman and Helen Plant); and *Books, Buildings and Social Engineering* (2009 - with Simon Pepper and Kaye Bagshaw), a socio-architectural history of early public libraries in Britain. With Peter Hoare, he edited Volume 3 (covering 1850-2000) of the *Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland* (2006). He was Chair of the Library History Group of the Library Association, 1992-9; and of the IFLA Section on Library History, 2003-7. He was editor of the international journal *Library History*, 2004-8; and is currently North American editor of *Library and Information History*. With Boyd Rayward, he is co-editor of the journal *Library Trends*.