

MEMORANDUM

To: Kate Birdsall, Project Manager

From: Sophie Schmidt, Heather Haely, Leah Wright, Emily Hobrla, Grace Rau, Olivia Dalby; Student Managers

Date: 21 September 2019

Subject: Re: Market Analysis

Kate,

Below is a report of our group (layout and photography) findings on the market for *The Current* and how we see the magazine moving forward. We make recommendations for the magazine and its tone based on research we conducted on local and national publications that target the demographic we see as ideal for *The Current*.

Please don't hesitate to reach out with any questions or concerns you may have about our findings.

Local Publications

We surveyed six (6) different local publications to Michigan State University and the greater Lansing area. This included two (2) print editions and four (4) online publications ranging from satirical work (*The Blacksheep MSU*) to alternative news (*The City Pulse*).

An overarching theme throughout all the publications we looked at were the similar audiences that the publications reached. They all focused at college-aged people/millennials.

The City Pulse

The first publication we investigated was *The City Pulse*, a local publication based in Lansing. It's considered an alternative news because it covers news items that aren't typically covered by other daily news sources. In terms of rhetoric, *The City Pulse* often uses a more colloquial tone and sometimes uses profanity. *The Current* should emulate the aspects of an alt newspaper because we are going for the same edgy and hard hitting vibe. We obviously don't want to copycat their paper and we have more people to answer to beyond just college-age demographic we're writing for. Something to caution would be the use of profanity as it may upset our distributors and funding.

Barstool Sports

Based on our research collected from Barstool Sports, a controversial but incredibly successful publication, we recommend that *The Current* follow its approach to content coverage and push the boundaries in what is relevant and, well, controversial. All press is good press and the rawer we are about what's making us and our readers upset, the better. We would also recommend that maintain as much engagement with its reader base as possible, though given that *The Current* is small and new, this may only become a bigger consideration with time.

VIM Magazine

We also studied a local printed publication on campus called *VIM Magazine*, a student-run fashion, beauty, and lifestyle magazine. They are kind-of known on campus, but would be more so if they had better distribution with their copies. They give them out in person on one day only within a couple of popular buildings on campus. We recommend that *The Current* distribute copies in the general East Lansing and Lansing area as well as on campus and over multiple days to get a bigger reader base. Additionally, they target men and women college students. Due to their type of female-skewed content, men are not as interested in the magazine. They also usually only portray the white woman's perspective. We need *The Current* to have a more diverse hard hitting stories within it to get a wide reader base of all men and women within all races, genders, and sexualities.

The State News

We also looked into The State News, a student-run campus newspaper for Michigan State University. The State News is actually funded through students' tuition (\$7.50 refundable tax that students pay at each semester's matriculation), and by advertising. This is a well respected publication, dating back to the 1910s, and has a reach of over 65,000 students, staff, and local residents, and attracted nation-wide attention when the staff published a headliner in the wake of the sexual assault trials in 2018 calling for former presiden Lou Anna K. Simon to resign, and have a large (31.9 K) Twitter following. One of the defining factors of The State News is that they claim to be independent and representative of the student body - "Michigan State's independent student voice." But lately the publication has been criticized for being overly biased and publishing only liberal content, but claiming to represent the student voice as a whole. So, while it can be assumed that college campuses are largely liberal, there are conservative voices that are not being represented within the publication. Moving forward, for us in *The Current*, it is crucial for us to be aware of our biases and who we choose to represent.

The Tab MSU

Another publication, perhaps the most similar to *ing* and *The Current*, analyzed was The Tab MSU, a campus-run publication that focuses on current events and news around East Lansing. In its overarching mission statement (as The Tab has many chapters for different cities and universities), it emphasized the importance of exploring voices that often go unheard and offering new takes on news in the area. I thought that seemed very similar to the goal of *The Current*: edgy news, hot takes, and important subject matter. I noticed that The Tab MSU seemed stagnant; I couldn't find any articles that weren't at least a year old. While the articles on The Tab MSU's site were interesting and relevant, they were no longer active. In order to stand out from comparable news outlets, *The Current* needs to learn from their

mistakes. It is important that we find our voice and style and stick with it, consistently providing relevant content and building a brand/name for *The Current*.

The Black Sheep

Finally, the last publication we analyzed is possibly the most infamous around MSU's campus. The Black Sheep is a multiplatform media company, with content on their website, Instagram page, and Twitter. Overall, the rhetoric of The Black Sheep's content is satirical: Headlines like "Jim Harbaugh Didn't Get Mumps Shot Because He Claims It's A Cowardly Vaccine" demonstrate The Black Sheep's cutting satirical stance. This content is certainly raunchy as well. PW professor Kate Fedewa says that satire should "punch up," meaning that it should show the humor in life, but not in a way that attacks people, and the Black Sheep's content does not always follow this model. It is always satirical, it is often funny, but it is sometimes a little mean. We think The Black Sheep is a good publication to keep in mind when developing *The Current* because it is so omnipotent in MSU student life. Some things we should consider replicating are The Black Sheep's tailoring to MSU-specific content, and their excellent social media presence. Emulating their social media style of frequent, relatable, and MSU -themed posts could increase our engagement at *The Current*.

Audience Analysis

Refinery29

For our online publication, we chose to look at Refinery29, a digital media and entertainment platform focused on women empowerment. Ultimately, the goal is to both inspire and entertain the audience "through optimistic and diverse storytelling, experiences, and points of view." Based on this, we assumed that much of the content is aimed towards young people - specifically late highschool/early college age women who are looking to find themselves in the world. But, just because their values align with inspiring women, does not mean that they exclude the male point of view, and actually have published a lot more content recently that seems to be aimed towards men. Refinery29 seems to be very aware of the biases they could harbor and discourage the idea of white feminism because they often note "they want to tell stories from multiple perspectives and work to get women from all walks of life" to contribute to their pieces.

R29 has a heavy online presence, with little to no print, and a very strong social media presence (especially Instagram and Snapchat). The use of these platforms provide a reliable and effective way to communicate with and draw in the target audience (young women). Researching R29 has helped provide much insight to the future we envision for *The Current*. First of all, R29 has a large online presence and a loyal following, which could prove to be very beneficial for *The Current* because digital media is a way to contact the intended audience directly. Also, R29's website is full of sleek, modern, clean designs that could translate well to the tone of *The Current*. Both publications have similar target audiences, the only difference being that *The Current* doesn't rely heavily on the female readership/perspective. R29 has a more casual tone with their more light hearted content which we

achieve with our blog pieces, and they have a more serious tone with their impactful stories which we should do with the printed magazine.

The Lansing State Journal

For our print resource, we analyzed our local newspaper, the Lansing State Journal. The Lansing State Journal is a Daily newspaper with circulation in the Greater Lansing Area. The main thread that connects most of the content in the LSJ is current events in Lansing. Whether these are job openings, sports updates, or general news stories, the intended audience is Lansing residents. The target demographic is not explicitly stated on their site, however the content and web design suggest that the viewership is in the above 25-49 and above demographic. There is a lot of content that focuses on sports, specifically local high school and college sports, which implies that a significant portion of readers is either a: in college: b: college alumni, c: has children in high school sports, or d. A Lansing area local. Also, the strong association/integration with USA Today, implies that their demographics might be similar. One (semi-outdated) study said that USA Today's main demographic is 18-49, with most readers being college educated males with median incomes of about \$70,000. We would expect these to be the readers of the LSJ as well, just in Lansing. One way they are reaching a younger audience is with their social media. Their Instagram has high engagement, with a following of around 8,000. One major way that the LSJ is distributed is through MSU's News Readership Program. With this program, MSU students pay \$7.50, which is itemized on their bill, and gets them unlimited editions of daily newspapers including the Lansing State Journal. This has likely increased student readership of print news and possibly lowered their average reader age. Regards to *The Current*, the Lansing State Journal is geographically near, but more classic local news. *The Current* is aiming to be a little more edgy. However, *The Current* could learn from the LSJ's successful social media presence by increasing the interactivity and relatability of our posts. This would reach our target 18-24 demographic.

***The Current's* Ideal Readers**

When building up this magazine, we have considered what audience we want to appeal to most. In terms of regions, we are looking at the Lansing/East Lansing area. We want to have a big audience, but we want to have a manageable goal for the target audience. Since we will have some feature articles for MSU/East Lansing specific readers, we will hone in on this area of Lansing to make sure we cater to their needs. Likewise, this content does turn away some readers that may be outside of this locale.

The ideal reader of *The Current* will be people from the Lansing, East Lansing, and Michigan State University area. We are writing for people who are ideally between the ages of 18 and 26, but also must keep in mind the audience of the actual partners and publishers we answer to. We hope to keep this magazine accessible and interesting to people of all identifying axes (e.g. gender, race, sexuality, etc.). Because the MSU audience alone is greater than 50,000 students¹, including both undergraduate and graduate students, we will get the biggest demographic through channelling our interest there. Through this reasoning, we believe that targeting those in the college-age is one of the safest bets. Because a

¹ "MSU Facts." <https://msu.edu/about/thisismsu/facts.php>

great deal of these readers identify as millennial and Gen X at the very least, we will cover topics that interest these audiences. Millennials are extremely interested in politics² and have high voter efficacy³.

To picture this, we imagined two people who fit this ideal reader persona. The first is a student named Logan, a gender nonconforming person who uses they/them pronouns. They study political science and have a minor in women and gender studies. Logan is really involved in Alliance MSU, the Council of Progressive Students organization, and really enjoys listening to country music and hanging out with their friends. Logan loves to read *The Current* every quarter because it doesn't shy away from topics that aren't normally covered in daily newspapers. They also are able to get copies for free at different locations on campus, which makes it easier to pick up when the new edition comes out. They really love that MSU students make the magazine, and love reading their P2W friends' articles.

Zach is a chemical engineering student at MSU. He's in his last year, and throughout his time has been really involved in InterVarsity and CRU, the Latinx group on campus. Zach religiously reads *The Current* because he likes to hear perspectives different from his. Though some of the articles have opinions he disagrees with, he thinks it's important to try to understand them. He likes that the articles often are on topics that interest students and ones that concern people on a larger scale.

Small Scale Publishing Comparison

When reviewing the Lansing-East Lansing area, and its surrounding cities, publishers are catering to cities that generally feature larger populations, a larger percentage of black residents, and a larger percentage of citizens that have college degrees. TV news is the primary source of event coverage, meaning that both small and large scale news publishers have to compete with the convenience of televised. Furthermore, the majority of citizens get their news articles from their phone, not a print publication.

The primary topics of interest are weather and crime with arts and culture (the interest of *The Current*) ranking much lower.⁴ In general, readership, viewership, and therefore ad revenue, are going down.⁵ As a new publication, *The Current* must focus on, in a market no longer thriving, establishing and maintaining even a small mark is an immediate need.

There are some suggestions that independent publishing is becoming a trend again. Using an unusual paywall model that only comes up three days after publishing an article, the site Mask Media is able to

² "When It Comes to Politics, Do Millennials Care About Anything?" *The Atlantic*. 2019.

³ Cillufo. "Gen Z, Millennials and Gen X outvoted older generations in 2018 midterms." Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/29/gen-z-millennials-and-gen-x-outvoted-older-generations-in-2018-midterms/>

⁴ "What are the local news dynamics in your city?" <https://www.journalism.org/interactives/local-news-habits/29620/>

⁵ 5 Key Takeaways State of the News Media 2018 <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/23/key-takeaways-state-of-the-news-media-2018/>

avoid advertisements and is trying to become a hub for counterculture media.⁶ Similar to my point above, I don't believe this would work for *The Current*-- at least, not now, but if we were to push for independence and had the market base, this could be an option.

Many small publications are optimistic about the future of print publishing, despite these dips in readership. "Custom publishing" is possibly going to be the drive for future growth in the industry, and involves taking a generalized publishing format and content team and tailoring it to a specific clientele-- this example involves travel, for example.⁷ Again, contrasting with the dip in 2018, magazine publishers are insisting that there is growth in their fields, not a decline, again by focusing on a niche or client-tailored content.⁸

Readers of magazines give the strongest ratings, followed by users of TV.



Figure 12.4

Attributes of news platforms - 2018

% of ratings from regular users who rated source highly (7-10)

	TV	Newspapers	Radio	Social media	Other internet	Magazines
Is important to me personally	72%	66%	63%	59%	66%	78%
Is high quality	75%	64%	67%	41%	66%	82%
Is accurate	71%	63%	66%	39%	64%	83%
Is trustworthy	70%	63%	66%	39%	62%	80%
Is impartial	63%	56%	59%	39%	57%	77%
Offers a range of opinions	67%	61%	59%	56%	62%	79%
Helps me make up my mind	60%	58%	54%	41%	57%	80%
Helps me understand what's going on in the world today	74%	64%	63%	50%	68%	84%
Has a depth of analysis and content not available elsewhere	63%	58%	54%	41%	60%	84%

This table suggests that the value of a magazine, regardless of publishing scale, is determined more by its relevance to the individual than any other form of media.⁹ In order to succeed, it's in the best interests of *The Current* to keep its content specific, honest, and of consistent quality. There's an element of pandering involved, but only to target audiences that we align with.

⁶ The Small Media Company is Making Independent Publishing A Threat Again <https://hackernoon.com/the-small-media-company-making-independent-publishing-a-threat-again-17df7f5f7bee>

⁷ City and Regional Magazines Capitalize Custom Publishing <https://www.foliomag.com/city-regional-magazines-capitalize-custom-publishing/>

⁸ Magazines are Alive and Well <https://whatsnewinpublishing.com/magazines-are-alive-and-well-publishers-refresh-their-strategies-for-the-print-format/>

⁹ Ofcom Figure https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/Vbn-Rpx4_ZAJ66KNoutH8fKqhgRRjeOoMpl_Ih-fKjHedTSF9GCWvZL-WxGcfYjzBegcIFsRJPTmc6yJEPRXfxRBLvFxU4uVRDL79wICkdCmVibKLeblIkWvhg73iNISIExHBpy1

Dos & Don'ts of Magazine Publishing

When we looked at Folio, we found one piece that served as a what-to-do guide for publishing a magazine, and another that served as a what-*not*-to-do guide.

The first was titled “5 guiding principles for doing branded content right,” and we picked it because we thought the principles that aligned with this piece would be helpful in creating *The Current* from the ground up - like maybe we could get ahead of some issues we may encounter down the line. The principles are believing what we sell, publishing things that have real value, make considered judgment calls, trust your audience by sharing values, and never underestimate the intelligence of the audience. With branding *The Current*, I feel these guidelines would be very helpful to keep in mind as we move forward. We are in the process of creating content, tone, and designs all at the same time, and it can be hard to remember what to prioritize. But these are clear suggestions that are relevant to the re-branding, or in our case new-branding, of the magazine, and will be helpful to keep in mind throughout the process of publication.

The second article we chose from Folio was Steve Smith’s “Magazine Media: Talking About a Better User Experience isn’t Enough.” He spent the majority of the article pointing out faults in media that he considered pet peeves: obstructive advertisements, pop up videos, hidden/broken links, a subscription screen being the first things new users on a site see. He points out that creators aren’t taking users’ preferences into account anymore, and are more concerned with advertisers. This piece offered some great insight to things that readers of *The Current* will not want to encounter on our site, and gave us a list of things to be conscious of. We should keep our new site’s layout (and print layout!) straightforward and easy to read, any other forms of media we link (Instagram, Twitter, etc.), should be functional and easy to find, and, while we can’t completely disregard advertisers, we need to keep in mind the best ways to incorporate ads into our layout that keep them visible without being obtrusive. We are acting as the “creator,” and it was nice to see an article reminding creators of things (other than relevant content) that attract or repel viewers; it’s an important viewpoint to keep in mind as we go through our rebranding.

Recommendations

Based on the research we have presented in this memo, we see *The Current* moving forward with an edgy and fresh face. In order to keep consistency within our brand, we need to follow our tone, keeping it in our printed and online pieces. We must give free published print copies of the magazine to students and people in the area. This allows us to have a bigger audience and be accessible. Additionally, we don’t want readers driven away if they have opposing opinions on issues. We need to be aware of our biases to effectively keep our audience. With our articles, we should cover controversial topics that are relevant and important. In these issues covering more than the white woman's perspective is essential. This expands our variety of topics and contributes information and ideas that our target audience wants.

This is engaging to our user base and keeps with the tone and goals of *The Current*. Finally, for our audience growth we need better distribution for our area. All of these are needed for us to be successful.