KEEPING AN EYE ON THE BRAND: HOW MONOCLE MAINTAINS A MINIMAL BUT EFFECTIVE WEB PRESENCE FIVE YEARS ON

by

Hannah Jenkins
B.A (English & Communications), Trinity Western University, 2010

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Publishing

in the
Publishing Program
Faculty of Communication, Art and Technology

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Summer 2014

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Approval

Name: Hannah Jenkins
Degree: Master of Publishing
Title: Keeping an Eye on the Brand: How Monocle Maintains a Minimal but Effective Web Presence Five Years On

Supervisory Committee:

Roberto Dosil
Senior Supervisor
Senior Lecturer

John Maxwell
Supervisor
Assistant Professor

David Michon
Industry Supervisor
Managing Editor, Monocle

Date Approved: April 30, 2014
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Abstract

This report analyzes trends in online publishing and how they have affected high-end print magazines, focusing on the redesign of the Monocle magazine website. Established in 2007, the magazine is known for its unique mixture of current affairs and international design stories, with a particular focus on Japan and Scandinavia. In 2012 the magazine began a re-launch of its Website. The report examines Monocle’s Web model for its success in building an online presence for the Website capable of achieving the following important functions: Acting as an extension of the print publication with short articles and multimedia, offering increased reader interaction with writers and other users, and strengthening the brand through the expanded content and functionality.

Keywords: Monocle Magazine; Magazine Publishing; Social Media; Magazine Branding; Tyler Brule; Online Publishing; Wallpaper Magazine; Magazine Trends
Acknowledgements

Thank you to my supervisory committee Roberto Dosil, John Maxwell, and David Michon: your thoughtful guidance took this paper from an idea to 51 pages I am proud of. A big thank you to Monocle magazine and all those who took the time to provide me with valuable information about the company. In particular, I’d like to thank Andrew Tuck, who gave me the access necessary to write this paper and was a pleasure to learn from for two years. To Harris & Hoole, the north London coffee shop – this paper would be nothing without your iced lattes. And finally, a big thank you to my parents, who made it possible for me to get this degree and to pursue the career I’m passionate about all the way to England.
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Introduction

Founded in 2007, Monocle magazine is known for its beautiful aesthetic, its unique subscription model and for its opinionated founder and editor-in-chief, Tyler Brûlé. In five years it has grown to a circulation of 73,000 copies worldwide with 16,500 subscribers, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulation.¹ The circulation area is divided between: Europe (55%), North, Central and South America (25%), Asia/Middle-East/Oceania/Africa (20%) (Monocle Media Kit 2013). Brûlé is celebrated in the magazine industry for founding the highly successful Wallpaper* magazine in 1995, when he was just twenty-eight years old. Wallpaper* is now owned by TimeWarner and serves as perhaps the most apt comparative title to Monocle. To put Monocle’s success in context, Wallpaper* has 17,300 worldwide subscribers, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulation. While this is a thousand more subscribers than Monocle, Wallpaper*’s subscription costs only £64/annum, while Monocle subscribers pay significantly more at £90/annum. Overall, Monocle is earning £377,800 more from its subscriptions. This is a significant amount from a title that is twelve years younger than Wallpaper* and not as well known.

Like Wallpaper*, Monocle stands out for its physicality. It has no iPad edition and, until recently, very little content on its website for free (subscribers have always had full access to Monocle magazine’s archive online). This report explores how a magazine brand like Monocle can be successful in the digital realm by building on its print identity. The report also discusses how Monocle’s digital strategy and online practices compare to those of its competitors. Finally, it reviews in detail Monocle.com’s 2012 redesign and discusses if it is, in fact, possible to be a premier print magazine that also has a vibrant online presence.

¹ The Audit Bureau of Circulation is cited in the references but it requires a password to access. Password available upon request.
Chapter 1. The Context and Vision of *Monocle*

Before discussing *Monocle*’s digital strategy it is imperative to understand its context and vision. 2007 was not a good year to start a magazine. *The Economist*’s September 2007 the article titled “Out of Vogue” noted: “In America and Europe magazine publishers have a common lament: total circulation is either flat or declining slightly as people devote more time to the internet, and an ever greater share of advertising spending is going online.” According to magazine database Mediafinder, 591 magazines ceased publication in North America in 2007, the highest number of the decade. Around this time there was a particular niche that publishers were trying, and failing, to break into: a luxury business magazine for men. Condé Nast tried twice, first with *Men’s Vogue*, launched in 2005 and again with *Portfolio*, launched in 2007. Both publications strove to weave business coverage with lifestyle content, hoping to gain advertisers from each genre, and both were price at $4.95 USD (£2.95 GBP) per issue. They were essentially they same magazine, except that *Portfolio* used slightly heavier paper stock in contrast with *Men Vogue*’s glossy format. Despite Condé Nast’s best efforts, both *Men’s Vogue* and *Portfolio* folded in 2009 (Ives, *Ad Age*).

So when Tyler Brûlé launched *Monocle* on February 15, 2007 as an independent luxury title aimed at international businessmen with an interest in design and fashion, the media industry was understandably skeptical. In *Businessweek* columnist Jon Fine called it “an ill-conceived vanity play with no chance for traction beyond the few fortunate who live like Brûlé,” and in *The Guardian* James Silver argued that it wouldn’t be able to compete with *Newsweek* and *The Economist*. These critics grossly underestimated Brûlé’s vision for *Monocle*, which stretched beyond the magazine itself and encompassed a new, more lucrative, advertising model, a multi-platform brand including print, online and retail, and, most importantly, a loyal brand community. Brand community is defined by Muniz and O’Guinn as a “specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structural set of social relations among admirers of a
brand” (412). They go on to argue that “developing a strong brand community could be a critical step in truly actualizing the concept of relationship marketing. A strong brand community can lead to a socially embedded and entrenched loyalty, brand commitment [...] even hyperloyalty” (427). It is in the name of brand community that Monocle is able to run a highly successful inverse subscription model in which they charge their customers more money to subscribe than to buy each issue individually – a practice that is virtually unheard of in the magazine world. They charge £6 per issue, £80 per ten-issue subscription and £90 per twelve-issue special subscription (Monocle Media Kit 2013). As discussed earlier, while Monocle has fewer subscribers than other, more commercial, titles like Wallpaper*, its subscription model is more financially successful. Early on Brûlé identified that brand loyalists are willing to pay extra to officially become a part of the community and he set out to create a product worthy of their loyalty.

1.1. Brand Identity: The Magazine

The initial product was, of course, Monocle magazine. The stores in London, New York, Tokyo and L.A. were opened in that order a year apart over the next four years and the radio station, Monocle 24, was launched in October 2011. Before Brûlé commissioned a single article he started building a buzz around the brand - the first articles about Monocle appeared eight months before the launch, in June 2006. The reason he was able to start publicizing so early on was because his concept was so strong. This falls in line with what Bill Schley and Carl Nichols write in their book Why Johnny Can’t Brand: Rediscovering the Lost Art of the Big Idea; they write: “branding is about finding a specific IDEA that you stand for, finding a way to own that idea in a credible way, and ultimately building total trust that you will always deliver. It’s about your walk – well before your talk. You make physical, material adjustments to your product, service, and market conduct as necessary to align with that idea. Then you tell the world” (13).

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2 Campaign magazine ran an article on Monocle in July 2006, see:
http://www.campaignlive.co.uk/news/606577/
Brûlé’s “big idea” was to create a lifestyle magazine that mirrored the lives of the team who created it. This is exactly what designer Marty Neumeier describes in his much-celebrated book *The Brand Gap*. Neumeier writes: “A living brand is a collaborative performance, and every person in the company is an actor. When a rep lands a customer, when an admin takes a phone call, when a CFO issues a profit warning, when a product manager gives a demo, when an accountant pays an invoice - each of these events adds depth and detail to the script, just as surely as a new campaign or website does. People "read the script in their experience with the company and its communications, then retail their version of it to others. When people's experiences match their expectations, their loyalty increases" (136).

*Monocle* has mastered this idea of being a “living brand”. Everything from the paper stock used to send letters to the business cards with the gold-embossed *Monocle* “M” to the wine glasses are hand picked by Brûlé. The office itself is famously chic, and staff isn’t allowed to put their coats on the backs of their chairs or keep water bottles on their desks (Swedish-designed carafes are provided instead) to keep it looking clean. Brand expression extends to all reaches of staff behavior; staff are strongly discouraged from using Twitter and it is recommended that they keep their online presence minimal, so the public doesn’t associate staff members personal lives with the brand. Brand guidelines also extend to the style of clothes staff wears, right down to not wearing the colour purple because of Brûlé’s dislike for it (as chronicled in both columnist Andrew Goldman’s New York Times article ‘The Case against Purple’ and John Hudson’s Atlantic article: ‘Hey, Washington: Tyler Brûlé Hates Your Purple Tie’). Of course, *Monocle* only hires people who are already “on brand”. The interviewing process is as much about what books an applicant has read and art exhibitions they’ve seen and brands they are wearing as it is about their competency.

In a profile piece of *Monocle* that *New York Magazine* published in December 2010 Amy Larocca describes how strong the company culture is: “. . . and the *Monocle* staff live that way, too. One spring day in London, three of Brûlé’s deputies are at lunch at Dean Street Townhouse, the trendiest restaurant in the city right now, sipping glasses of white wine and comparing their Brazilian tans—they’ve all just gotten back.” It’s
scenes like these that make the reader believe that *Monocle* is more than an aspirational magazine or even a brand. It is a way of life.

At the core of the *Monocle* brand is *Monocle* magazine, with the tagline: "A briefing on global affairs, business, culture and design". This statement is fundamental to the *Monocle* brand and encompasses a whole new genre of magazine, and with it a new audience. It is not strictly lifestyle and it is not strictly news, it's a bit of both, carefully curated through the narrow lens of Tyler Brûlé and his editorial team. It's mix of content is so unique that vendors often don't know what section to stock in (Brûlé would prefer that it go with the business titles, but it often gets shelved with design titles).

When looking at the newsstand *Monocle* stands out because of its sheer physicality. Take the January 2011 issue, for example: at 242 pages, plus a manga supplement, city guide, substantial amounts of text and a very low advertising ratio (about 15%) *Monocle* stands out on a newsstand (Adams, Businessweek). In a 2006 interview Brûlé did with Mark Johnson of *Campaign* magazine he explains that part of his vision for *Monocle* is drawing inspiration from Asia, which he says holds clues to the future of publishing: “If you look at Asia, and in particular markets such as South Korea and Japan, they are thirty-six to forty-eight months ahead of us in the digital revolution but they've taken the decision to celebrate being in publishing by producing confident, robust, tactile products. The quality of print on the newsstand in both markets is so high.”

Brûlé modeled the design of *Monocle* after the Asian “mook” publishing trend, where a combination of “magazine” and “book” describes the production values and depth and quality of relationship Asian magazines share with their readers (Johnson). According to the *Campaign* article, Brûlé believes that “mook” model might be able to save Western publishing because the advertising buy-in is so much higher; he notes, “When [advertisers] see *Monocle* they say it feels like a giant book.” The “mook” model has a sense of permanence to it that regular magazines do not have. For example, as soon as a new issue of *Monocle* goes on sale the previous issues double in price (Johnson). This is because *Monocle* was created to have a collectable quality about it. In an interview with *The Australian* newspaper Brûlé says: “Immediacy demands that
readers consume [other magazines] in one sitting, whereas our view is that this should sit on your bedside table or coffee table and hopefully you can revisit it again and again.”

In addition to the heft of the magazine, Monocle’s aesthetic is characterized by Swiss-influenced graphic design and a variety of illustrations styles. In an interview with Grain Edit, Ken Leung, Monocle’s first Art Director, described the design as “an unquestionable nod to Swiss graphic design. The Muller-Brockmann \(^3\)-style grids provide a strong foundation to begin building and designing a page in the most legible and concise way possible. Using such a strict grid also enforces restraint, which, in my opinion is where the most interesting design comes from.” Leung went on to comment on the illustrations in the magazine: “I choose illustrators that display a sense of craftsmanship and detail in their work. They should have confident styles that aren’t based on trends or an over-reliance of technology.” The strong aesthetic that Leung helped Brûlé to create is of utmost importance to the brand because, according to Neumeir, “the hallmarks of a charismatic brand are a clear competitive stance, a sense of rectitude, and a dedication to aesthetics. Why aesthetics? Because it's the language of feeling, and, in a society that's information-rich and time-poor, people value feeling more than information” (19). Monocle magazine evokes a feeling of quality and exclusiveness, achieved by a combination of distinctive design and a price tag to match.

1.2. Brand Identity: The Website

So how does a brand that is so dedicated to their physical product approach the digital realm? According to Monocle’s 2013 media kit, they take a unique approach to the web with a focus on video, round-the-clock radio on Monocle 24 and an expansive retail store. Rather than rehashing the print edition online, their web strategy is to provide an in-depth complement to the magazine. It was conceived as a multi-platform brand from the start, with the website rolled out at the same time as the first magazine.

\(^3\) Josef Muller-Brockmann was a Swiss graphic designer and teacher who advocates for the use of the grid for page structure. He is the author of Grid Systems in Graphic Design and Design Problems, among others.
Unfortunately, no statistics are available from Monocle’s first three years online, but there is data on Monocle.com’s web traffic three months before and immediately after the website re-launch. According to internal statistics provided by Sally Moussawi, a digital assistant at Monocle, in June 2012 Monocle received 2,607,058 page views and in December 2012 (the month after the re-launch) they received 6,094,581 page views. While no other magazine would release their web stats for comparison, some insight can be gleaned from the American web-tracking service, Alexa.com. According to Alexa, Wallpaper* is the 45,954 most popular site in America while Monocle is significantly more popular as the 29,289 most popular site.

It helps that Monocle was conceived as a multi-platform brand from the start. Before the magazine was even launched Brûlé knew that he wanted to launch the mag and website simultaneously, followed a few months later by the first retail store in London. On his personal website, Monocle’s first Web Director, Dan Hill, describes the initial vision for Monocle’s digital strategy: “We wanted to make Monocle a journalism brand that you had a weekly relationship with via the internet, as well as the monthly relationship via the magazine. Ultimately, this should be daily, if aspirations come to fruition. This weekly relationship would be through a form of broadcast media, using the internet’s ability for distributing video - something enabled only in the last couple of years, effectively - and thus conveying the sense of a Monocle broadcast news element, complementing the ‘book’. The challenge was to create a working environment that would produce it, and then an online environment that could distribute it” (Hill). This format was met with mainly positive reviews, and moderate to low page views. Mark Nagurski of the online magazine Really Practical wrote that the site is not merely a “digital recreation of the print title;” rather, “the Monocle website operates to complement and extend the print version of Monocle. This is perhaps what makes the Monocle website such a successful contributor to the Monocle brand since it makes the website “a destination in itself.” The observation that Monocle’s initial website extended, complemented and supplemented the magazine was a win for Monocle’ digital team as that was exactly their objective. Adrian Shaughnessy of Eye Magazine goes a step

4 For a more detailed analysis please see Appendix A
further by stating that the website trumps the magazine: “If the aim of 21st-century publishing is summed up in the dreary phrase ‘cross platform,’ then Monocle hits the target. But the magazine is eclipsed by the website, which is a triumph of confident and unclichéd design. It boasts broadcast quality video and audio, and functions as a genuine expansion of the magazine and not the usual online dumping ground.”

While many of these initial reviews were positive, the site also garnered criticism. On his blog, Speedbird, popular author and urbanist Adam Greenfield critiqued that there wasn’t enough content on the site to justify users paying for it, and that the site should be more social (there was no place for comments or for linking to articles on the initial site). Both these issues were addressed in the re-design, which is discussed in further detail in chapter four.

1.3. Brand Identity: Retail

In addition to the magazine and the website, Monocle was launched with a third branding platform: retail. It started out with one store in London that opened at the same time as the magazine was launched, and has now expanded to Tokyo, Hong Kong, New York, Los Angeles and Toronto. The stores market co-branded merchandise, created in conjunction with high-end designers and boutique brands. Products range from bags by Japanese brand Porter to Castaner Espadrilles to a custom bicycle by London-based manufacturer Death Spray.6

This strategy of co-branding merchandise is describe by Rao and Ruekert as “…a synergetic alliance in which the sum is greater than the parts” (87). Brûlé recognized co-branding as an opportunity to boost the Monocle brand by associating it with other high-quality brands. As Begemann writes: “A partner is not selected for particular attributes which are incorporated into the product, but rather because positive brand associations from the partner brand elevate the co-branded product’s image, but particularly because positive spillover effects on one’s own brand are expected” (36). Each co-branded piece that Monocle stocks in its shop is both a source of revenue and brand extension, and it

6 See: http://Monocle.com/shop/
assumes that the *Monocle* brand has a certain level of cachet and that brands from all over the world want the *Monocle* ‘M’ emblazoned on their products. Keller notes that, when done right, “the inherent combination of at least two brands on one product naturally offers a unique set of functional and emotional benefits which reverts to more than one brand identity and might therefore attract consumers” (360). This model has clearly been working for *Monocle*; in 2010 it opened a Hong Kong bureau funded purely by the proceeds of the *Monocle* stores in Los Angeles and London (Brook).
Chapter 2. Print Advertising Model

Monocle’s main source of profit comes from advertising, both in print and online (see chapter 3.2 for analysis of online advertising). Monocle is particularly attractive to advertisers because of its clearly defined readership, and as Johnson and Prijatel noted, “Advertisers are thus attracted to magazine publishing in particular because of the relative specificity of their audiences; magazines are typically consumed by clearly defined readers” (28), which creates a competitive edge for advertisers wanting to communicate with certain audiences. Brûlé positioned Monocle among a lucrative set of titles, including publications like GQ and Vogue, as well as more niche publications like Wallpaper*. These titles have relatively high cover prices, but Monocle’s is by far the highest: GQ and Vogue are both £3.99 GBP ($6.50 CDN), Wallpaper* is £4.99 GBP ($8 CDN) and Monocle is £6 GBP ($10 CDN). McKay writes: “readers that are targeted by this sector are categorized as ABC1 audiences. They are described as sitting at the highest levels of social and economic status and possess significant purchasing power” (194). According to Monocle’s 2013 media kit: “The Monocle readership is urban-dwelling, MBA-educated, CEO/MD/entrepreneur working in finance, government, design and the hospitality industry. Readers have an average income of £207 thousand GBP ($340 thousand CDN) and travel on ten business trips a year plus five holidays. They are savvy, design-conscious consumers and investors in property, art, cars, timepieces, fashion and interiors” (7).

Given their good positioning in the market, Monocle has taken a unique, brand-partnership approach to advertising. Instead of having a clear line between ads and editorial, Monocle frequently creates “sponsored content” which represents the successful synthesis of advertising and content. Piers Fawkes, a marketing analyst who did a study of Monocle’s advertising methods in 2009 writes that this approach, “Wins for

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7 Statistics from the Audit Bureau of Circulation: http://www.abc.org.uk/Products-Services/
the reader, publisher, and advertiser.” A particularly good example of this symbiosis is Absolut Vodka, who have had an eight-page travel guide in the June 2009 issue of the magazine; to reciprocate the magazine also advertises a travel pocket book, which is available at international duty free stores with the purchase of Absolut vodka. This makes Monocle’s brand of “sponsored content” neither blatant advertising or product placement. Rather, it is content marketing that allows the magazine to accrue revenue from sponsors while providing readers with information and offers that are more likely to appeal to them. Strong brands such as these want to know first and foremost that they are reaching an audience with a significant disposable income; being willing to spend £6 GBP ($10 CDN) on a magazine, as Monocle readers do, is a good indicator of wealth. Thus, advertisers are willing to spend significant amounts on Monocle because they know the high-value that the consumer places on Monocle itself. Brûlé elaborates: “Our pages are very expensive . . . Of course there are a lot of people who we don’t see in the magazine who would be wonderful as brand partners. But if you can’t pay then you can’t be in the magazine . . . the right companies see what we’re doing, and they see there is an absolute value to what appears on the page” (Pawle).

Monocle features a relatively low volume of ads—a typical issue is 15% advertising compared to Vogue who has as high as 72% advertising (Cosby). However, because of their “brand partnership” strategy they are able to charge significantly more than other publications targeting a similar reader demographic and luxury advertisers. While Monocle will not release the specifics of what they charge advertisers, it is evident by their high profit margin. This unique approach to advertising has proved to be successful; in a time when most high-end magazines were losing advertisers, Monocle was actually gaining advertisers. For example in 2009, two years after Monocle’s debut, many luxury magazines were looking thin. Simon Kurs of The Guardian reported that the April 2009 issue of i-D had 20% fewer ads than its April 2008 issue, while British Vogue’s 308 pages was 80 pages fewer than the equivalent issue in 2007. According to the World Advertising Research Centre, in 2008, the UK magazine market ad-spend was down 10% from the same time period in the previous year. (Kurs) Harper’s Bazaar, for example, saw its total number of ad pages in January to March of 2009 fall by nearly 20% compared with 2008, according to Nielsen Research. British Vogue was in a similar situation (down 16%), while Elle was only slightly better off, with 6% fewer ad pages than
during the same period in 2008. Kurs calls the shortage of advertising “a critical issue”. Meanwhile, while so many luxury magazines were losing advertisers, The New York Times reported that Monocle’s advertising was up significantly in 2009 (Carr). Brûlé partially attributes Monocle’s success to being willing to go and meet advertisers in person: “So many media outlets have pulled back on travel in editorial and advertising . . . You have to be out there. Even in this day and age you are not going to finish a deal in Seoul without having a couple glasses of wine and singing some karaoke with the clients (Carr)”. It is this brand-partnership attitude that sets Monocle’s advertorials apart.

However, the close relationship between the magazine and their advertising clients has also made Monocle the topic of scrutiny. While many publishers will refer to advertisers as business partners, Brûlé goes a step further by calling them “patrons of Monocle’s approach” (Carr). The concept of brands actually visually partnering with magazines, as appears in Monocle with the M x Brand logo stamped on every advertisement, is unheard of in North American advertising. In the United States, magazines abide by the rules of the American Society of Magazine Editors, which call for clear bright lines between advertising and editorial. Brûlé disagrees with having such strict rules around advertorials. In 2009 he commented to the New York Times: “We are a global magazine and I think that approach is beginning to go sour in the fridge.” One of many examples of Monocle’s approach appears in the September 2010 issue: there is a large insert on Singapore, with a survey paid for by its government and several large companies there, but the articles are generated by the magazine staff. Brûlé defends his decision to mix content and advertising: “Rather than some boozy lunch with editors and sponsored parties, we cut right to the chase. We have editorial integrity, we don’t accept freebies and we make the final decision about what is worthy . . . as publisher and editor, I’m part of the religious and secular worlds, and I make the decision. No offense, but I think the whole church-and-state thing is a very tired, U.S. concept” (Carr).

Monocle has intentionally blended ads and editorial. Advertisements that appear in the magazine, including the government of Taiwan, Rosetta Stone and Absolut vodka, mimic the look and ethos of Monocle. Advertisers, of course, love the exposure it gives them. Todd Wood, vice president for industrial design at Research in Motion, the maker of the BlackBerry, which has sponsored Monocle Weekly, a podcast of the magazine,
stated that he likes Monocle’s approach precisely because of the lack of conventional boundaries. Wood notes: “[Brûlé] and Monocle are at the leading edge of innovation in terms of their industry . . . their approach to information and intelligence is a very good fit for us” (Carr). As traditional sources of advertising dwindle and clients become accustomed to a multi platform world where their messages are just one more kind of content, Brûlé’s innovation is so far paying off. This may also be a reflection of the acceptance on the part of the reader of the blurring of lines. It also confirms, the strength of brands and branding and how much they are incorporated into today’s lifestyle of consumers. That is why brands are discussed today as experiences, and as such they are part of everyday life and the relationship of the consumer with any given successful brand becomes hard to separate from all other daily experiences. They become a natural presence. A validation of individual choices and lifestyle. A demonstration of belonging to a group or “tribe”. The next section will discuss Monocle’s innovative approach to digital media.
Chapter 3.  Best Practices of Luxury Magazine Websites

Monocle.com went live in February 2007, a full decade after the first luxury magazine websites (Vogue.com launched in 1996 and GQ.com launched in 1997). Because of this time lapse, Monocle was able to learn from the experiences of others. Of course, Vogue.com and GQ.com have both evolved with technology. In the beginning, the sites were very text heavy and all the content was copied directly from the magazines. This can be seen by looking at the website ‘Wayback Machine,’ which has catalogued every version of every website since the early 1990’s (see Vogue.com in 1997). As technology has improved, magazines realized that it was in their best interest to put unique content on their website, so that people had a reason to visit the site independent from the magazine and in return advertisers would pay to be on the website. In the early to mid 2000’s magazines focused on making their website a destination. In 2007, the year both Monocle and the iPhone were launched, the potential for advertising dollars grew significantly as people began consuming content on their smart phones.

According to a report by Amy Mitchell and Tom Rosenstiel at The Pew Research Centre’s Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), Americans are now fully into the digital era. As of 2012 more than 75 % of U.S. adults owned a laptop or desktop computer and 44% now own a smartphone. About 51% of smartphone owners use that device to get news, as do 56% of tablet owners. And nearly a quarter of the population, 23%, now gets news on multiple digital devices. Tablet ownership is now at 18%, up from just 11% in the summer of 2011.

While niche, monthly magazines like *Monocle*, *Vogue*, *GQ*, and *Wallpaper* are not strictly news publications, they do cover current events, whether it be in politics, fashion or design. Success in online publishing requires these publications to go well beyond re-hashing the pages of their latest issue. In this section, the report will discuss the online functions that have become the standard for publications such as *Monocle* and look at the methods of publishing that *Monocle* and its competitors have implemented in order to build their online brand. This section examines how *Monocle* has responded to online publishing trends and which features it has chosen to incorporate into its editorial content and design. The discussion will include an examination of the tools used to build an online presence and identity, branding techniques, and social networking features. The analysis of how *Monocle*, *Vogue*, *GQ*, and *Wallpaper*, have approached these issues will reveal the best practices for a luxury magazine online Edition.

The essential functions of luxury magazines' websites are:

1. To act as an extension of the print publication by providing consistently up to date information that is tailored to their reader's niche interests through short articles and multimedia components.
2. To strengthen the brand through this expanded content and functionality that will reach a broader audience and create additional advertising opportunities and;
3. To offer increased reader interaction with writers and other users through features such as blogs and options to comment directly on stories; to offer opportunities for social networking.

### 3.1. Best Practice: Extension of print publication

The first function of a luxury magazine’s online platform is to act as an extension of the print publication. Multimedia has proved to be one of the best ways to do this as it avoids giving away the editorial content of the physical magazine and it adds a dynamic element to the site. Short videos have become an essential part of *Monocle*, *Vogue*, *GQ*, and *Wallpaper*’s websites, and with good reason. According to a 2007 study by the National Endowment for the Arts “on average, Americans aged 15 to 24 spend almost two hours a day watching TV, and only seven minutes of their daily leisure time on reading” (Kabani & White, 162). It’s clearly a great way for magazines to capture their
audience, and it’s also a great way to capture their advertisers. Kabani and White go on to quote the market research firm eMarketing, stating that spending on online video advertising will grow to $4.6 billion CDN (£2.8 billion GBP in 2013, representing a more than sevenfold increase from the $587 million CDN (£3.6 million GBP) spent on online video in 2008 (161).

Each publication has taken a unique approach to how they display and profit from video content. Vogue and GQ are both owned by Condé Nast, and so their approach is similar. Both websites have a dedicated “video” section that includes one-off videos as well as series. For example some of Vogue’s series are: “Vogue Weddings”, “Monday Makeovers” and “From the Vogue Closet”. All of their videos are hosted through their own site (not an outside host like Youtube or Vimeo) and have a one-minute advertisement at the beginning that is compulsory viewing. While Vogue.com doesn’t show how many times the video has been viewed, it does show the number of shares it has received on Facebook, which is typically fifty to one hundred. GQ’s numbers are similar for their series, which include: The Women of GQ, and GQ Covers. Condé Nast has gone one step further with GQ and in March 2013 invested in a YouTube channel with an original mini-series titled “The Ten”, sponsored by Proctor & Gamble, Microsoft, and more (Mau). Vogue and Vanity Fair, another Condé Nast publication, are set to follow suit later in 2013 (Mau). Condé Nast is taking online video so seriously that it has hired Dawn Ostroff, formerly of The CW and Lifetime, as president of its new entertainment division. Ostroff says that the new digital network is “creating more ways for our unparalleled audience of influencers and trendsetters to experience their favorite content” (Mau).

Wallpaper*, which is owned by Time Warner Inc. also have a dedicated video section on their site, but have not yet gone as far as Condé Nast by creating a YouTube channel. The videos are categorized by subject and range from art and architecture to travel and design. Examples are: “City shorts”, a six minute tour of a unique city like Helsinki, Rotterdam, Berlin or Seoul and a fifteen minute video of Ermenegildo Zenga’s spring/summer 2014 fashion show in Milan. Their videos get anywhere from fifty to four hundred shares on Facebook. While they don’t have compulsory ads at the beginning of their videos they do have sponsored videos, or videos made “in association with”.

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Monocle’s online video strategy was different from the start; it never included for example citizen journalism, or a YouTube channel. As Monocle’s first Web Director Dan Hill put it:

“We'd seen many other broadcast news outlets appear to be getting ever more parochial, and produce editorial with lower quality (closing bureaux, only covering stories directly relevant to their region, cost cutting generally in production values - the apparent step forward of journalists filing video reports via their mobile phone is often merely a cost-cutting exercise, and a step backwards in reporting quality). Equally, the rise of the internet as a medium for video is characterized by YouTube, which although a brilliant platform play in many ways, doesn't do the kind of journalism we were interested in, or offer original high quality programme making. So we wanted to raise the bar in online video: to shoot things in high quality - we have our own Panasonic AG-HVX200 HD cameras and Mac Pro-based Final Cut Pro editing stations - and edit and encode professionally, embedding on the page in 16:9 ratio, to subtly give a sense of high quality broadcast”.

The result for Monocle has been excellent. Their video views far exceed that of their competitors, with between five thousand to ten thousand views per video⁹ and 450,000 film downloads each month (Monocle, Digital Opportunities). They have also found unique ways of collaborating with advertisers by creating bespoke video content. For example, in June 2013 Monocle partnered with Samsung to promote their new smartphone. Instead of making a video about the phone, Monocle used the phone’s slogan “Bringing people together” and tied it into a short documentary on the best chef in Italy by relating how food brings people together. A compulsory-viewing ad for Samsung preceded the video and embedded a Monocle-written advertorial for the phone beneath the video. Monocle also relies heavily on video to promote their magazine. At least two videos per issue are produced; one “Issue Promo” and one video based on a story in the magazine. Often, these videos will just be a series of still photos set with music and narrated by one of Monocle’s staff. Monocle is the only magazine out of itself, Vogue,

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⁹ Monocle’s internal web statistics provided by Sally + http://hypebeast.com/2013/4/Monocle-takes-a-look-inside-the-tokyu-hands-superstore?_locale=en
GQ, and Wallpaper* that are creating still-shot videos and, given the low-production cost and popularity of the videos, it seems to be a valuable format to garner advertising dollars.

Another platform that magazines have been adopting as an extension of their print publications is audio—specifically, podcasts. The low cost of producing podcasts, compared to video, makes sense for magazines strapped for cash that want to add another interactive element to their site. Thousands of magazines and newspapers air weekly podcasts, including The Guardian, The Economist, The Globe Mail, as well as the four magazines previously discussed in this section: Monocle, Wallpaper*, Vogue and GQ. Because Vogue and GQ are Condé Nast publications, their podcast formats are similar. Both do themed music podcasts, as well as sporadic podcasts from various fashion events. Wallpaper* does fewer podcasts, but does occasionally air an interview with a designer or architect. Monocle has taken podcasting more seriously, creating a 24-hour radio station around the medium. (The station’s operation is discussed in more detail in chapter four). The original podcast, The Monocle Weekly, was launched with the magazine in 2007. Dan Hill describes its early success on his website: “Best of all, we hit number 1 in the iTunes News & Politics chart just before Christmas 2007. It’s hardly the most rigorously calculated chart in existence, but still an achievement, I think, to have the likes of the rather more well-funded and well-established Economist, Guardian, BBC, Reuters and Sky trailing in your wake through December, even temporarily (with the first four there having an average age of over one hundred years or so, and our brand barely ten months old at that point)”. It seems that listeners are eager for podcasts that offer fresh perspectives, even from one of the older media formats. As American radio personality Adam Carolla told Forbes: “The podcast is as old as two people talking on street corners” (Wolf). The medium’s sense of old-fashioned personableness is in line with Monocle’s brand values and is one of the reasons Monocle has embraced it.

3.2. Best Practice: Digital Advertising Platform

Another important function of luxury magazines’ online media presence is the opportunity it allows for online advertising; both because of the revenue it brings in and because of the potential to strengthen the magazine brand by associating with other
brands online. According to research firm eMarketer, online advertising is now more lucrative than print, with revenue from online ads surpassing that of combined newspaper and magazine ads for the first time ever in 2012 (Hof). The reasons eMarketer cites are not surprising: people are spending more time online, there is a perception that online ads are more measurable, and there’s a growing demand by advertisers for ad campaigns that integrate multiple channels, including online. The numbers speak for themselves: eMarketer estimates US digital newspaper ad revenues grew 8.3% to 3.3 billion USD in 2011. Print advertising revenues at newspapers fell 9.3% to 20.7 billion USD in 2011. At magazines, US print ad revenues are expected to rise 0.5% to 15.34 billion USD in 2012, up from 15.3 billion USD last year. US digital advertising spending at magazines grew 18.8% to $2.7 billion in 2011 (Hof).

*Vogue, GQ, Wallpaper* and *Monocle* have each taken a unique approach to online advertising that is in line with their brand. One of the ways that GQ, Vogue and *Wallpaper* make money online is by hosting “pay-per-click” advertising. This is the conventional banner advertising that many websites host. *Monocle*’s former web developer and designer David Longworth explained that brands work with a stock advertising agency who will connect them up with a website that fits their demographic; the brands and the website hosts (in this case, the magazines) don’t talk directly to each other. Some of the brands that have been matched to *Vogue, GQ, and Wallpaper* through stock advertising agencies are: Land Rover, Tiffany & Co, and HTC. This is effective in that luxury products get matched with luxury magazines.

Another way *Vogue, GQ* and *Wallpaper* are monetizing their online edition is through participation in social media. For example, In the winter of 2013 *Vogue* used Twitter, Facebook and Polyvore (a fashion site) to find both those passionate about the topic of fashion and those who exude high levels of influence in the area *Vogue*’s concept was to take passionate and influential social personas, and have them test out their advertiser products, and be the first to blog about these new products and line releases. The network of bloggers ranges from highly influential Parisian fashion blogger Garance Dore to fashion students at Central Saint Martins in London. By doing this, *Vogue* extending its offering to their advertiser base, as it gives advertisers an avenue of brand and product syndication for which they were not set up in the past. As Susan
Plagemann, Publisher of Vogue, put it “There are a lot of people who are self-appointed experts. The biggest difference is, we’re developing a program of ambassadors who spread the word digitally across a very big network about the access that’s been given because of Vogue” (Crandon).

While pay-per-click advertising and social media may be effective for Vogue, GQ and Wallpaper*, Monocle has taken a different online advertising approach to its competitors. Like its print advertising strategy (discussed in chapter two), Monocle’s online advertising is all bespoke. They use no social media or stock advertising agencies. Instead, they pursue the same kind of brand collaborations that they do in the print edition of the magazine. On the original website, this kind of advertising was minimal as they didn’t have the capacity to host rich media, such as embedded video, and they couldn’t track how many views the adverts were getting. Enabling rich media was a key driver for the 2012 redesign, as having embedded video and ad tracking greatly increases both the price that Monocle can sell ad space for and the experience that a user coming to Monocle.com will have with the “co-branded” advertorial.

Monocle’s method of “co-branding” is also referred to as native advertising. Todd Wasserman, the business editor of Mashable, defines native advertising as “a web advertising method in which the advertiser attempts to gain attention by providing valuable content in the context of the user’s experience. Native ad formats match both the form and the function of the user experience in which it is placed. One form of native advertising, publisher-produced brand content, is similar in concept to a traditional advertorial, which is a paid placement attempting to look like an article. A native ad tends to be more obviously an ad than most advertorials while still providing interesting or useful information. The advertiser’s intent is to make the paid advertising feel less intrusive and thus increase the likelihood users will click on it” (Thorton). For example, Monocle’s website in July 2013 featured a photo of a New York-based entrepreneur named Adam Tarlow, along with a short bio. The content took up nearly all of Monocle’s homepage, and while it may have looked like an in depth profile, the likes of which Monocle frequently runs, it wasn’t. Rather, the homepage experience was just one component of a sophisticated campaign paid for by Samsung, and an example of Monocle’s all-in – and lucrative – approach to native advertising (Kantrowitz).
Despite their seemingly textbook “native” approach, Brûlé is adamant that *Monocle* does not, in fact, use this method. He told the digital marketing magazine *Digiday*: “We absolutely never, ever use the term native advertising,” calling the expression a “bizarre, North American piece of marketingism.” But whether you like the term or not, *Monocle* is, in the words of Skift CEO Rafat Ali, teaching a “masterclass” in it (Kantrowitz). Like with the print advertorials, the digital advertorials are produced in collaboration between the advertisers and *Monocle*’s design team. As discussed in the section on *Monocle*’s print advertising (chapter two), this blurring of the “church-and-state” divide between editorial and sales is very intentional. Editors accompany ad directors on sales calls. Brûlé went on to tell *Digiday*: “I’m of the opinion that all good journalists are good salespeople too.” While the ad team discusses pricing and tries to close the business, editors give *Monocle*’s potential clients insight into the publication’s editorial calendar and explain the reasoning behind certain editorial decisions. Once the client buys in, *Monocle*’s team then works with the client on the concept, produces illustrations, and executes the final ads with the client’s input. The result is an advertisement that meshes with the magazine’s look and feel and aspires to be appealing to readers. All the ads are labeled vaguely – with the brand’s name followed by “X Monocle” – but leave it to the readers to figure out what that means. According to Brûlé, the collaboration allows *Monocle* to make bold moves, like giving over its homepage to Samsung for a time: “Ultimately Samsung had to sign off on it, but we’re the ones who delivered the final film to them . . . This is something which has been produced by us, it’s our photo director, it’s our broadcast director who has overseen this. We know that visually it’s not going to look out of sync totally when you click through to it” (Kantrowitz).

While *Monocle* itself seems to have escaped criticism for having its ads resemble editorial, the practice itself has come under fire in some quarters. Andrew Sullivan, a particular harsh critic put it this way when critiquing BuzzFeed’s ads: “If journalism is not understood to be separate from advertising, then it has lost something incredibly important in a democratic society” (Warzel). Despite this negative outlook, the financial incentive of online native advertising is huge. The Samsung campaign brought in roughly one million dollars to Monocle.com and online native ads can, depending on the month,
account for up to one quarter of Monocle’s total revenue. According to Brûlé, “This is the direction that the web and digital need to go in if it’s going to sustain itself” (Warzel).

3.3. Best Practice: Social Media

The second function of luxury magazines’ online presence is to offer readers increased interaction with writers and other users through features such as blogs and public comment sections, and to offer opportunities for social networking. Over the past ten years the rise of Facebook and Twitter have pushed media brands to interact directly with their consumers online. There are many benefits for magazines using social media, one of the most obvious being increased brand awareness. Erik Qualman in his book Socialnomics writes:

“Ask any Fortune 500 executive, small business owner, or sole proprietor what their most effective form of marketing is and I guarantee their answer, without hesitation, is Word of Mouth. Word of Mouth is not a new concept but what happens when this is taken to another level? What happens when Word of Mouth goes to World of Mouth? . . . while traditional word of mouth can be slow to spread the opposite is true for Facebook status updates. These updates are pushed via news feeds to all friends in the network. Or, to an even greater extent, a platform like Twitter gives you access to 85 million users who have the ability to read your tweets. This scales much better than an individual telling a few friends a week about the new product or service she enjoys” (1-2).

Qualman argues that social media allows magazines to connect with their audience globally, in real time. He goes further in emphasizing the benefits of communicating digitally by stating: “Since your opinion is in digital format it’s less likely to be misunderstood or diluted over time . . . with word of mouth the message loses meaning and context. However, when that message is passed digitally, as is the case with social media, it is less likely to lose its original intent” (3). In his book, ‘Twitterville: how businesses thrive in the new global neighborhoods’, Shel Israel notes that it is because of the convenience, speed and reach that Twitter is the most rapidly adopted communication tool in history, going from zero to ten million users in just over two years (7). Israel continues: “On Twitter, word can spread faster than wildfire. Companies no
longer have the option of ignoring the conversation” (7). According to Twitter, the number of users grew 32% last year to around 24 million active users in the U.S. (500 million total accounts worldwide) (Mitchell & Rosenstiel). Facebook is an equal juggernaut. The Pew Research Centre’s Project for Excellence in Journalism’s report states: “Some 133 million Americans, or 54% of the online U.S. population, are now active users on Facebook (out of 850 million monthly active users globally). They also spend an average of seven hours there a month, fourteen times the amount of time people spend on average on the most popular news sites” (Olmstead, Mitchell & Rosenstiel). Today most magazines use Facebook and Twitter as the main means of communication with their readers, whereas in the past they would have communicated primarily via the post. Vogue, Wallpaper* and GQ have all taken up the call to be on Facebook and Twitter seriously. Vogue leads the group with over 4 million likes on Facebook and 2.5 million followers on Twitter, GQ is next with 540 thousand Facebook likes and over 400 thousand Twitter followers and Wallpaper* has over 200 thousand likes on Facebook and 850 thousand followers on Twitter. They use this media to build deeper relationships with the readers audience and to draw them to their website, which increases traffic and as a result their online advertising revenue. Monocle has taken a completely different approach, choosing not to have any official social media accounts at all. Speaking to columnist Gideon Spanier at the London Evening Standard newspaper, Brûlé described social media as “mostly just “a lot of chatter” and continued by saying “I think many media brands will find or are finding it’s a brilliant way of also diluting your brand”.

He’s not alone in his stance. In the book ‘How to Win Friends and Influence People in the Digital Age’, Silicon Valley guru Guy Kawasaki is quoted as saying: "Digital communications have made it possible to reach more people in faster and cheaper ways. You could make the case that technology has made it possible to blow one's reputation faster and easier than ever" (Carnegie 1). For a magazine like Monocle, that is synonymous with the brand of Tyler Brûlé, having multiple employees and even outsiders commenting on the brand online could hurt the brand, instead of helping it. As John O’Reilly points out in EYE magazine: “What makes Monocle matter, like Wallpaper* before it, is that it is the product of one man’s imagination, and its eccentricity gives it a shot at success” (Shaughnessy). Brûlé is also the head of Winkreative, a
creative agency housed in the same office as Monocle. He told Spanier that while at the helm of Winkreative he’s seen some clients who have spent decades building “a sense of mystique” and are now being “too accessible”. Brûlé himself isn’t on Facebook or Twitter. “I don’t have to be. I’ve got a magazine,” he says, noting it is easy to contact him and other staff as all their email addresses are in Monocle”.

By publicly positioning Monocle as a magazine that is not on social media, he has further defined the brand and strengthened it. There is no shortage of evidence illustrating Brûlé’s decision not to put Monocle on social media; in an interview with Bloomberg TV he even went so far as to answer the question “What do you want to be remembered for?” With: “Not Tweeting.”10 And the decision to be off social media isn’t just limited to Brûlé or to the magazine in a formal capacity; it extends to all staff. This is in line with the brand constraints Neumeir describes in The Brand Gap: “Every person in the company should be issued a personal shockproof brandometer - a durable set of ideas about what the brand is and what makes it tick. Because no decision, big or small should be made without asking the million-dollar question: ‘Will it help or hurt the brand?’ The secret of a living brand is that it lives throughout the company, not just in the marketing department” (138). For Monocle, social media has been deemed an activity that will hurt the brand: “I want my reporters to focus on the job they are doing, not focusing on Twitter or what their peers are doing on social media.” Brûlé said to the Jakarta Post, “When you have a network anchor asking viewers to follow them back, it’s about following them, not the station” (Emond). With Monocle, everything comes back to the brand, and therefore to Brûlé himself. Without social media, how does the brand interact with its readers? As Carnegy writes, “There is branding—the introduction of you to others. And then there is relationship building—the interaction between you and others . . . You cannot sustain success on branding alone. In the end, business is still about one person relating to another” (64-5).

As Brûlé says in his promotion for Monocle 24 radio, “Monocle’s idea of social media is a good conversation over a glass of chilled white”.11 Every year Monocle hosts

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10 See interview: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=upZXlMlDJo
11 Monocle’s M24 advertisements on monocle.com/24
a number of exclusive subscriber events around the globe where Brûlé personally talks to the individuals who have bought into his brand and are paying a premium price to subscribe. A Monocle subscription of ten issues costs £90 GBP ($150 CDN), compared to £19.50 GBP ($30 CDN) for Vogue and GQ and £64 GBP ($52 CDN) for Wallpaper*. The exclusive subscriber events—Brûlé’s brand of social media—are one of the biggest draws to paying more for a subscription.

While the shunning of Facebook and Twitter has mainly generated a positive response for Monocle there have also been negative effects. Because Monocle is not on social media in an official capacity, tribute and parody accounts have appeared on Twitter, Facebook and in blog format. There are two tribute Twitters: @monoclebrief and @travelfan, with over five thousand followers each. Monocle Brief is dedicated to Monocle 24 radio and only posts links to M24 shows; Travel Fan “is an account for the fans of travel and all things Monocle. We are separate from Monocle magazine” - they post about anything and everything that Monocle is doing. There is also a parody Twitter, called @ohmonocle, which makes fun of the magazine by tweeting direct quotes from it that sound overly pretentious. All of these accounts use slightly altered versions of the Monocle logo, so if you are not looking closely it would be very possible to think that it was, in fact, an official Monocle Twitter page. Often people do mistake these Twitter’s as official Monocle accounts and try to contact them via Twitter and are disappointed when no one responds. In this way, Monocle not having its own Twitter account weakens the brand as their social media presence still exists but is managed by other people. The same goes for Facebook; the Monocle Facebook page has over 65 thousand likes and is not run by Monocle staff. This means that fans who like the page because they think that it is Monocle run will be sorely disappointed by the lack of updates, as well as spam that gets posted on the page and not removed.

With the growing popularity of social media, and the interest in having Monocle on Facebook and Twitter (as proven by the number of people subscribing to their fan pages), why doesn’t Monocle adapt? Because their lack of presence online has become one of their key branding platforms. In one of the most influential books on modern branding, ‘The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding’ by Al and Laura Ries, they describe the importance of brands sticking to their values: “Markets may change, but brands
shouldn’t. Ever. They may be bent slightly or given a new slant, but their essential characteristics (once those characteristics are firmly planted in the mind) should never be changed. If the market swings another way, you have a choice. Follow the fad and destroy the brand. Or hang in there and hope the merry-go-round comes your way again” (153). Brûlé basically paraphrased this quote in the Jakarta Post interview. When asked why there are strict rules around employees using social media he answered: “I think that if you have built up your brand over a century, or even over decades, you cannot put everything out there. There still has to be some mystery behind it, the thrill of the chase, instead of being on and open all the time” (Emond). While Vogue, GQ, and Wallpaper* believe that being in constant conversation with their readers online will strengthen their brand, Monocle believes that limiting the conversation will strengthen their brand. The Ries’s go on to write: “Run up a red flag whenever you hear the words: ‘Why should we limit ourselves?’ You should limit your brand. That’s the essence of branding. Your brand has to stand for something both simple and narrow in the mind. This limitation is the essential part of the branding process” (157).

This comparison of Monocle’s best practice online compared to Vogue, GQ and Wallpaper* shows that while these magazines are all doing some things the same (such as heavily using video and finding ways to be innovative with online advertising) they are also using vastly different strategies. While Monocle is the only magazine of this grouping that is not on any social media, the different brands are using social media in various ways (Vogue uses it to promote advertisers while Wallpaper* uses it more to connect to the design community). As these practices continue to evolve; it will be interesting to see which strategy proves to be the biggest success long-term.
Chapter 4. The Digital Redesign

Following on the discussion of best practices online this section examines Monocle’s digital redesign and discusses why and how six years after the launch Monocle.com was overhauled. When Monocle launched the original site in 2006, a few months before the launch of the magazine, it received mixed reviews. London based designer Adrian Shaughnessy was very positive: “If the aim of 21st-century publishing is summed up in the dreary phrase ‘cross platform’, then Monocle hits the target. But the magazine is eclipsed by the website, which is a triumph of confident and unclichéd design. It boasts broadcast quality video and audio, and functions as a genuine expansion of the magazine and not the usual online dumping ground”. But technology design guru Brendan Dawes wasn’t as impressed, saying, “This site relies too heavily on the design of the print magazine – it looks like a straight export from Quark” (Shaughnessy).

Despite the differing opinions from design professionals the original site functioned well for Monocle’s purposes, which primarily conceived as a platform for multimedia such as video and audio. The reason why the site focused on multimedia features instead of the journalism featured in the magazine is simple; according to Brûlé “It didn't make sense to us to give away our journalism for free. But we did have to think: 'How do we add value online?’ We started with video then it became radio but it couldn't replicate what we were doing in print” (Nicoll). This is tied to Monocle’s research which established that the online audience is largely overlapped the print audience: “Our audience online is very similar to the print edition, though we know our reach is bigger in some markets. People are passionate about radio and there are waiting lists for our special product collaborations. Our audience visits because ours is a more personal approach to the web: rather than shouting and trying to drive traffic with gimmicks we prefer to host our visitors in a more intimate environment. That means radio, longer-form films and a premium retail environment” (Monocle, Media Kit).
It also meant a closed site with no links to social media. As discussed in chapter one, part of Monocle’s brand strategy is founded on keeping the brand mysterious. In compliance with the brand the original website had no links to Facebook or Twitter and no place for comments or way to share videos and articles on social media. Putting it bluntly, Brûlé told The Australian newspaper in 2009: “with Monocle we don’t host a discussion. There is no place to post comments on our website. We’re not forcing our writers to update blogs every five minutes . . . If you want to engage with us tune into our Sunday morning radio programs” (Pawle).

4.1. Redesign: Concept

While the original site was cutting edge when it was launched in 2007, five years later it was apparent that it was in need of a conceptual update. The online retail portion of the site wasn’t working very well, and there were complaints that articles couldn’t be shared from the website (allowing articles to be shared would not diminish the mystery of the brand but would, rather, give Monocle a wider exposure). In Designing Brand Identity Gavin Cooper is quoted saying, “a website is a living, breathing brand tool that needs to be cared for over time (Wheeler 166)”. With Monocle experiencing so much other growth in their five years as a company the website had been neglected. However, the launch of Monocle’s web-based radio station, M24, in October 2011, forced the company to re-evaluate their digital strategy. For starters, the launch of M24 meant the launch of Monocle’s first ever app for smart phones. The Monocle 24 app was released on November 1, 2011 and granted users access to all the shows on M24, as well as Monocle’s city guides and their daily column, nicknamed the “Monocolumn”. It did exceptionally well in the first month, with over five thousand downloads at £6 GBP ($10 CDN). No other comparable magazine or radio app even charges at all - Vogue, Wallpaper*, GQ, and The Economist all give their apps away for free. The same thing goes for apps that are purely radio - BBC in Britain and National Public Radio (NPR) in the US both give their apps away for free. With the success of the app it was evident that the website could benefit from an overhaul, using the latest technology. Especially considering that when the original site was designed the first iPhone hadn’t even been launched yet (it was released a few months later, in June 2007). Monocle’s digital team
was keen to integrate the latest technology into the new site to help it get back on par with the magazine.

In the early 2000’s, when the pages on the World Wide Web were multiplying at an extraordinary rate, front end good design was not the primary focus, back end labour intensive programming was driving website development. As a result, many ugly websites were made and a lot of skilled designers shunned the medium. As Neumeir points out “technophobia, the fear of new technology, keeps a lot of skilled designers out of web design. They’re mostly afraid the technical demands of the medium will engulf their projects, leaving little time to work on the aesthetics. The result is that most web design, thus deprived of disciplined designers, still falls below the aesthetic level considered standard for catalogs, annual reports, and books” (98). Design has always been crucial to Monocle, so when they launched their site in 2007 they actually did the opposite of what Neumeir describes; they put the emphasis on design and sacrificed some technological functionality. A good example of this is the online shopping section of the site where shoppers can buy everything from magazine subscriptions to clothing. While it was consistent with the sophisticated design approach embraced in print the functionality of it was poor. Sara Geoffrey, the subscriptions and e-commerce assistant in 2011, explained that the problems lay in the structure: “it wasn’t always clear where you should look for things and you had to go through about five drop down menus before you could find the item you were looking for. It was also almost impossible for subscribers to change their addresses.” It was problems like these that Monocle’s digital team wanted to address in the redesign.

4.2. Redesign: Print into Digital

Monocle wanted to go beyond making it functional and attractive, they also wanted the site to tell a story. In Professional Web Design Cindy Chastain writes: “If we can learn to approach design more like writers approach stories, we will not only build richer experiences but start to develop a craft in our work that knows how and when certain narrative techniques can be used to engage the minds, emotions and imaginations of users. Knowing the craft of narrative helps us build better stories, which helps us turn a set of lifeless features and functions into a whole experience that
engages the minds and emotions of customers” (80-81). Monocle’s narrative is largely
told through specific elements of their design that appear in the magazine. Thanks to the
progress that has been made in web design, it was possible to tell that story on the web
and still have a functional, state of the art site. Monocle’s designer and web developer at
the time of the redesign, David Longworth, said: “If you look at the web now you’ll see
that graphic design principles like typography and grids are a lot more prominent. Online
design has matured. So we’re in a good place where we could bring in all the elements
of the brand. The core of Monocle’s brand design is simple: Plantin Helvetica, letters
and numbers and circles, a yellow salmon palette and grids.” To keep Monocle’s print
identity on the web, they incorporated these simple elements into all the various digital
branding they created for the re-design, whether it was for the homepage or for an email
blast. As Nico Bauman asserts in What is Web Design: “The development of corporate
identity for application to the Web needs to be sensitive to the medium, as it would in
development for application in print, on clothing, in retail environments or on vehicles.
The Web is a malleable medium with multiple dimensions such as time. User interaction
is fundamental to it, and users’ experience of it extends from an email they receive to a
document they may download or a Web page they may print” (62).

One of the key things they wanted to do differently with the new site versus the
old one was to design explicitly for web, not design something that looked like it was for
print (as Brendan Dawes critique implied when he said of the original site that it looked
like “an Indesign file slapped on the web”) (Shaughnessy). Also in What is Web Design
Macdonald is clear that functionality actually should trump design, he says: “The rise of
branding has tended to be in inverse proportion to real innovation in product
development. However, the Web is one of the remaining areas in which innovation is still
considered to be a more important driver of customer adoption than brand and
marketing, and branding should not lead product development. Rather, it should be a
part of users’ quality of experience of the product” (62). To ensure that Monocle’s brand
identity stayed intact throughout the redesign the same design team worked on the
print magazine and the website, the same creative principles were applied to both.
Longworth said “doing it this way ensured single-mindedness. Monocle doesn’t do
design by committee, in order to keep things from getting watered-down.” To get up to
par with functionality the team made use of the latest technology to enable embeddable
fonts, including the creation of custom fonts for the iconography. Longworth said that Richard Spencer Powell, Monocle’s Creative Director, was a strong advocate of designing for the medium, not just sticking print online. Above all the team was clear that they wanted the experience of the new site to be a positive one; they didn’t want people becoming frustrated because they had to go through five click-through windows to get to the product they wanted. In Professional Web Design Volume 1 Smash Media write:

“Brand message is no longer the thing that sells. Experience sells. If the intangible pleasure, emotion or meaning we seek can be made tangible through the use of story and narrative techniques, we will build more compelling product experiences. And if the experience is more compelling, businesses will profit from droves of loyal, experience-discerning customers. Without this understanding, choices about what features should be included and how they should behave seem both uninspired and disconnected. Sure, we have business goals, user needs, design principles and best practices to draw on, but these things won’t get a team to a place where it is collaborating in the same conceptual space, let alone designing for emotion and meaning” (82).

4.3. Redesign: Iterative Approach

In order to test if Monocle.com was achieving the desired experience from its users, the design team based the creative process on an iterative approach. Smash Media describes the iterative approach:

“One key aspect of a good design process is regular evaluation. Evaluation techniques are varied but their overall characteristic is to place the product in a real scenario of use and see how it performs. This exercise may be conducted by someone with design expertise, or knowledge of the domain in which the product will be used, who can give an objective assessment of the success of the solution judged against the brief and the other criteria we have outlined. It may also be conducted by members of the design team acting out the use of the design solution while objectively assessing it. Or it can be carried out by asking typical audience members to use it to attempt certain
intended tasks. The learning from these exercises becomes part of the next phase, or iteration, of the design process” (44).

Longworth, Monocle’s designer and web developer at the time of the redesign, said that, due to the tight deadline, they had the general look and feel of the site signed off early on but didn’t spend much time getting 100% perfect, accurate designs. The pages were designed 80% as static for a fixed ‘desktop’ view. For mobile they designed the header but nothing else, figuring out how things would look as they integrated the content. This allowed the team to fine tune pages based on actual content, not just hypothesizing. Once the data was integrated they meticulously went over everything and tidied it up and added polish. At this stage they launched the test site at beta.Monocle.com and began to share the link internally so they could gather staff feedback. The double benefit to this approach was that the staff felt involved in the digital redesign, even if they were not directly involved in the process.

4.4. Redesign: Responsive Design

One of the reoccurring pieces of feedback that the digital team kept receiving was that staff wanted Monocle.com to be optimized for viewing on their mobile devices. As discussed earlier, Monocle does not, and likely never will, have an app version of the magazine. However making the site more mobile friendly could create a middle ground to appease those who want to read content digitally and also allow Brûlé to keep his “cool” factor of being offline. To do this the team created a responsive design solution. In Designing Brand Identity Wheeler describes this “a singular content management system that responds to varying screen sizes because of its flexible grid. Instead of designing multiple variations of applications or websites to work on specific device formats, one website is developed to adapt to all devices” (73). With nearly a quarter of the US population receiving their news on digital devices, it is no longer acceptable to simply have a good website that looks nice on a desktop (Mitchell & Rosenstiel). As Ethan Marcotte says in Responsive Web Design, “The web has moved beyond the desktop, and it’s not turning back” (2).
Anyone with a keen eye who picks up a copy of Monocle will see that their design direction all revolves around grids; with the new website it is the same. Using grids allows them to scale the design across all of the elements of the brand—even beyond the website to the retail side and now the café. Using these grids allows for design longevity; as Longworth says: “With the old website they only thought two to three years in advance maximum. With the new site we tried to plan five to ten years out. More importantly, to design for the devices that don’t exist yet. In 2007 there was no iPhone, now worldwide the majority of web is mobile and there are thousands of different devices and thousands of sizes.” This is a new aspect of design that can be difficult for print designers to understand.

With technology evolving so rapidly, and the majority of people viewing news online as stated earlier, the only way to ensure brand longevity is to design for mediums that don’t yet exist. How is this possible? A group of the world’s leading designers and web-developers have come together to ensure that the technology does not outrun the design, as it did in the early 2000’s. When that happened, the web was full of chaotic sites that were unstructured and aesthetically lacking. The web has a significantly more prominent place in our world now than it did a decade ago. These designers have founded a collective called “Future Friendly” (http://futurefriend.ly/index.html). Their website is part manifesto, part “how-to” manual on how companies (publishing and otherwise) should technologically prepare themselves for the advances to come. Longworth, Monocle’s designer and web developer at the time of the redesign, said that Future Friendly’s guidelines were taken into consideration when building the new Monocle site. For example, one of their guidelines is: “Well-structured content is now an essential part of art direction. Consider how it can flow into a variety of containers by being mindful of their constraints and capabilities. Be bold and explore new possibilities but know the future is likely to head in many directions. Highly capable smart devices, simple constrained devices, interoperable devices and (a whole lot) more are part of our future. Structure and store your content accordingly.” By using grids, and designing the new website in such a way that it can translate across multiple devices (and years), Monocle’s digital platform finally came up to par with the rest of the brand. As Monocle’s designer and web developer David Longworth says: “Responsive web design gives one clear voice across multiple devices. This kind of continuity is quite a Monocle trait. The
idea of responsive design is that you have one codebase, so it’s the same website that adapts to different screens.” From a branding perspective it is essential. In Designing Brand Identity Wheeler writes: “Websites lead the top of the brand necessity list - no longer enslaved to the desktop they migrate to wherever the consumer is, on her iPad or her Smartphone, to the mall, on a hike, or under her pillow. Websites have made every business a global business accessible by almost anyone anywhere” (166). Now while Monocle is “Keeping an Eye on the world” the world can also be keeping an eye on them, no matter where they are.12

4.5. Redesign: Critical Response

Monocle’s new website launched on December 11, 2012 to critical acclaim. The Twittersphere responded almost instantly with high profile web designers Naz Hamid and Greg Storey tweeting their praises. Perhaps the most significant comment came from Ethan Marcotte, the inventor of responsive design, who tweeted to Longworth that the site was a success.13 Wider recognition also came in the form of a Webby award, described on their website as “the leading international award honoring excellence on the Internet.” Monocle.com was nominated for best practice. They also received high praise from the popular web design magazine SpeckyBoy, where the chief editor Paul Andrew pinpointed their achievement of combining the latest technology with good design. Writing about the new Monocle site he said: “there are thousands of content-rich websites out there, but very few seem to focus on good design. Sure, they have put a lot of thought into organization and structure, but for the most part they do rely on the old tried and tested magazine-style layouts, and never really tend wander far from those confines. Fortunately, not all are like that. Some do dare to venture out and breakout off those shackles and design something truly unique and, and dare I say it, beautiful.”

While the technological design world was praising Monocle’s web designers, Brûlé was not as happy. As a self-made magazine man, he understood deadlines in terms of print; sending a magazine to press two months late is simply not an option. Web

12 Monocle’s brand slogan
13 See tweets: https://twitter.com/RWD/status/278591240751161344
development obviously has a different timeline, and Brûlé was not accommodating of that. At an event in Auckland in February 2013 Brûlé said: “I have very little patience for web developers, especially those working on Monocle’s recent website redesign” and went on to chide them for not being able to stick to a deadline” (Ahmed). With this clear disconnect between print and web timeline expectations, it’s not surprising that the three main designers and web developers who headed up the website redesign resigned six months after the project was complete. Paul Reagan, who was the Web and Broadcast Manager, David Longworth, the primary web developer and designer, and George Wilson, a junior web developer, all left Monocle within a month of each other. Perhaps their leaving is a good example of the underlying tension that still exists between print journalism and the digital realm. When a magazine is put to bed, it is a finished product. The printed errors are unfixable and the design is unmovable. A website, on the other hand, is always in flux; it is never completely finished.
Conclusion

Despite this rift between print and web expectations, the redesign of Monocle.com is quantifiably a success, with monthly page views up 1, 141, 747 in the six months after the launch compared to the six months before.¹⁴ Not only is it on par with the best practices of luxury magazines on the web, it is leading the pack (as is evident by its webby award nomination mentioned before). Having a beautifully designed and functional website is an achievement for any brand, but particularly for a brand that has built their identity around a design driven print presence. Monocle has maintained its stance on technological engagement by continuing to stay off of social media and releasing minimal content for free on Monocle.com. They have balanced their minimal online output by designing a new site that is both aesthetically beautiful and technologically advanced. Above all, Monocle, under the direction of Brûlé, has never swayed from their original branding vision: An editorial agenda focused on upbeat, quirky stories from all corners of the globe, an emphasis on quality and craftsmanship, and a design aesthetic with strong Swiss and Japanese design influences. This vision permeates their five international retail stores, the ten magazine issue they print each year, the 24 hour web radio station they broadcast from their central London headquarters and now, from their website.

The website is arguably the most important platform for a brand as it acts as the portal to all the other platforms; it is not the website in and of itself that’s important, but rather the brand experiences that it gives consumers access to. As discussed in chapter four, the 2012 Monocle.com redesign has fixed essential problems in the online retail store and magazine subscription services. It also serves as the primary portal for Monocle 24 radio. The various platforms of the brand are constantly supporting each other. As the father of Modern branding, Wally Ollins, says: “The best and most

¹⁴ See Appendix A
successful brands are completely coherent. Every aspect of what they do and what they are reinforces everything else” (Carliner). Those who are hyperloyal to Monocle will notice that the grid used in the magazine is the same as the grid used online as is the colour palette. They will recognize that Monocle’s co-branding initiatives are in line with the company’s implicit values and they will know exactly what kind of story to expect from Monocle whether it is in print, online or on M24 radio. The reason Monocle’s digital strategy is working is not just because it is beautifully designed or functional, it is because beautiful design and functionality are integral to the Monocle brand.
References


Appendix A. Screenshots of Monocle.com Before and After Redesign

Figure A.1: 2008 Monocle Website
Figure A.2: 2013 Monocle Website
Appendix B. Monocle Media Kit 2013

Description:

The accompanying PDF shows an overview of Monocle magazine including their readership, circulation, year ahead editorial plan, advertorial work, online presence (including statistics), radio presence, and a list of advertisers.

Filename
monoclemediakit2013-1.pdf