

Current Comments

Science Digest—New Look, New Personality

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In an ongoing attempt to report on developments in science journalism we have periodically covered science magazines in these pages. I've told you about the very old—such as *Scientific American*¹—and the very new—such as *Discover*² and *Omni*.³ Others, like *Science News*⁴ and *New Scientist*,⁵ are somewhere in between. This week I'll take a look at an oldster with a new face—*Science Digest*.

Science Digest was first published in January 1937. Its first editor was G.W. Stamm. The new format it adopted in the November/December 1980 issue is so different from the old version that it is for all intents and purposes a new magazine.

Some of you will remember the original *Science Digest*. It was, like *Reader's Digest*, a digest in the literal sense of the word—a small magazine that contained mostly excerpts from other magazines and books. It was equally dull. Issued monthly by the Hearst Corporation, *Science Digest* consisted of about 96 8" × 5" newsprint pages. Articles covered a variety of subjects in all areas of science, from forensic medicine⁶ to volcanic eruptions.⁷ Written largely for a high school audience, articles were somewhat light in content and tone. Photographs were small, infrequently used, and normally black and white.

The "new" *Science Digest* is a different animal altogether. It is now a full-sized 8" × 11" magazine printed on glossy, high quality paper. Full-page color photos and drawings accompany

many features. Written for college-educated adults, articles are no longer excerpts, but full-length pieces produced exclusively for the magazine. The magazine itself is much longer as well, covering over 120 pages in each issue. About one-fifth of those pages are devoted to regular features, two-thirds to articles, and another one-fifth to advertisements. A full-page color ad costs about \$10,000. A full-page black and white ad costs about \$6,000. A single issue of *Science Digest* sells for \$2.00, while a year's subscription (ten issues) costs \$11.97, and can be ordered by writing *Science Digest*, P.O. Box 10090, Des Moines, Iowa 50374. Foreign subscriptions are \$14.97 for ten issues.

The new *Science Digest* is largely the creation of its current editor, Scott DeGarmo, and the publisher, Hearst Corporation. DeGarmo first proposed the new format in 1979. The publishers, aware that *Science Digest* was no longer doing well the way it was, readily accepted his ideas. A trial issue in the new format, published in the winter of 1979, soon sold out. Two other "special edition" issues interspersed with the regular *Digest* in the following months met with similar success. DeGarmo credits this success to the foresight of Hearst Corporation and the high quality of his staff. In the November/December 1980 issue, *Science Digest* permanently changed its format.

The magazine has met with continued success and is growing steadily. It claims

a current total circulation of about 540,000. About 300,000 of these are copies sold on newsstands. Its audience has changed drastically with the new version. *Science Digest* surveys show that readers tend to be young and college-educated. Seventy-five percent are male, and many (over half) are involved with science in some way. This is precisely the sort of audience DeGarmo intends to reach. He also notes with pride that about 215,000 of *Science Digest's* subscribers are people who sent in the magazine's subscription insert cards. In other words, they are people who read the magazine, liked it, and subscribed.⁸

If the letters that arrive at *Science Digest's* editorial offices in New York are any indication, *Science Digest* readers are quite pleased with the new format. Many find the magazine informative, intriguing, and exciting. Naturally, this pleases DeGarmo immensely. In fact, this seems to match his editorial goals perfectly, i.e., "to excite the reader's imagination, to make science fun and exciting, and to help the reader see the world in new and different ways."⁸

To that end, the magazine offers articles and features on a wide variety of topics. In addition, DeGarmo hopes to keep his readers interested by an ever-changing format. He is continually adding new things, he says. One month, for example, he introduced a puzzle, the next, book reviews.⁸

The magazine opens with a well-planned contents page. Each article is listed, with its author, and a brief description of the article's content. Regular features are also listed. The contents page is followed by several of the magazine's regular features. The first, entitled "Contributors," is exactly that—a brief write-up of three or four of the magazine's major contributors. Since each issue of the magazine contains about a dozen articles, this is only a small sampling of the authors. Many

of the articles are written by free lancers, and these short pieces highlight points about the authors not revealed in their articles. For example, a recent write-up on painter Richard Ellis revealed that he gathers information about his favorite subjects—whales—by swimming with them.⁹ These write-ups give the organizational affiliations for those authors discussed. Brief biographies of other writers are given with their articles.

Another regular feature is called "The Universe." In this page and a half feature, different scientists speculate on various aspects of the universe and their effects on the Earth. For example, Wallace Tucker, Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, and University of California, Irvine, has written about the consequences of galactic explosion,¹⁰ and the probable explanation for the star seen by the biblical Magi.¹¹ In another "The Universe," John Gribbin, physics consultant to *New Scientist*, discusses a theory that postulates life on Earth actually began in a comet.¹²

"The Universe" is followed by the feature "New Science." In this section, which is divided into the areas of Update, Technology, Mind and Body, and Everyday Science, the latest developments in science are presented in brief, newspaper-like reports. This part of the magazine, in fact, is printed on heavier, yellow paper, much like a magazine within the magazine. "New Science" reports have dealt with such subjects as how astronauts spice up their food while in space,¹³ indoor pollution,¹⁴ the dress code of the Kayapo Indians of South America,¹⁵ and how much brain a human being needs to function normally.¹⁶ Interspersed among these reports are facts reminiscent of "Ripley's Believe It or Not." One tidbit, for example, noted, "The human eye can distinguish about 17,000 different colors."¹⁷

Similar to "The Universe" are the features "Human Nature" and "Specula-

tions." These essay-like pieces are each about one page long. Basing their observations on what science does know, the authors of these pieces speculate on a range of topics, from the possible origins of human writing,¹⁸ to the implications of Darwin's theory of evolution for modern machinery.¹⁹ Each is clearly speculation, not fact, a sort of exercise in which the author thinks aloud.

Each issue of *Science Digest* contains about 12 or 13 major articles. Unlike the old version of *Science Digest*, these are nearly all written exclusively for the magazine. They cover an array of topics, from biology to technology. For example, a recent issue contained articles on computers,²⁰ cave paintings,²¹ and Nobel laureate Linus Pauling.²² According to DeGarmo, all are checked carefully for accuracy by a special research team of four people.⁸

Articles are frequently accompanied by marvelous artwork. For example, in "Fire & Ice," author Isaac Asimov and artist April Lawton combine talents to produce a graphic representation of the geological and chemical evolution of the Earth.²³ In a similar article, "The first billion billion billion billionth of a second...and then," Lawton, as both author and artist, depicts the creation of the universe.²⁴

According to DeGarmo, the articles are intended to be both exciting and informative. As an example, he points to an article about a proposed subway train that could cross the US in 54 minutes.²⁵ The train, traveling on magnetic levitation, would reach speeds of 6,000 miles per hour. While that may seem fantastic at first, says DeGarmo, the article goes on to explain the principles of magnetic levitation, and to point out that such a train—albeit experimental—is already in existence in Japan. My good friend, Takashi Yamakawa, US Asiatic Co., Ltd., tells me that the Japan National Railway hopes to use these trains on a commercial service between

Tokyo and Osaka sometime within the next ten years.²⁶ It was interesting to discuss these new plans while riding the Bullet train from Kyoto to Tokyo on my recent lecture tour of Japan.

Other articles in *Science Digest* have included a picture essay of Antarctica,²⁷ a piece on starfish,²⁸ and items on healing with electricity,²⁹ the evolution of the brain,³⁰ and giant machines.³¹ With this eclectic mix of ideas, DeGarmo hopes to give the magazine a "continuing sense of vitality."⁸

Each issue of the magazine ends with the "Test Yourself" feature, in which readers are invited to quiz themselves on what they've read. About 50 questions are given, along with the page numbers on which the answers can be found. Following this is a "Challenge" feature. The challenge consists of a picture of an unusual plant or animal. The reader is presented with a variety of facts about the creature presented, then asked a specific question about it. For example, one challenge pictured a black and white striped butterfly whose markings closely resemble the number 89. The brief description explains how the coloration of various butterflies works, and the reader is asked to imagine how this butterfly uses its markings. An answer is provided elsewhere in the magazine. (In this case, the 89 appears to be some sort of protective coloration, according to the expert quoted in the article, entomologist Lawrence Gilbert, University of Texas. Gilbert explains that the butterfly "may be using its colors to say, 'I'm not worth catching'.... Predators such as birds may easily spot its conspicuous design, but they rarely catch the quick and agile 89 and soon learn that this butterfly is 'unprofitable prey'—not worth pursuing.")³²

So far, *Science Digest* seems to have successfully changed its image. Overall, it is not much different from some of the other science magazines I've reviewed in these pages. I suspect that it reaches a sig-

nificant segment of the same growing market. What that means can only be determined from market surveys which tell us not merely the composition of a particular publication's readers, but also how many of them read two or more science magazines. The changes at *Science Digest* have been so rapid that we have not yet had a chance to reevaluate it for coverage in *Current Contents*® (CC®). In order that it and similar magazines at least get into our online data bases and ASCA®, we cover them in one or more applied editions such as *CC/Engineering, Technology & Applied Sciences (CC/ET&AS)* or *CC/Agriculture, Biology & Environmental Sciences (CC/AB&ES)*.

As the head of a company based on the science of citation, I have one major gripe with *Science Digest*. None of the articles contain references. This reduces their value for teaching or research. DeGarmo assures me, though, that in line with his policy of continually adding new features, references will be added in the future. I certainly hope so. The magazine will lack credibility until this occurs. I congratulate *Science Digest* on its remarkable transformation. You've come a long way baby—but you've still got a way to go!

* * * * *

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