Before the Internet, people got most of their information from newspapers and magazines. Editors selected, prioritized and organized the information they felt was important to readers, creating a semblance of order in a chaotic world. No publication took this role of editorial curation more to heart than Reader’s Digest. DeWitt Wallace founded Reader’s Digest in 1922 on the premise that we live in a world of too much information (sound familiar?), and he dedicated his publication to seeking out and condensing the best stories and presenting them in a pocket-size magazine published 10 times a year. This formula helped make Reader’s Digest one of the best-selling paid circulation magazines in the U.S. for more than 80 years and a global powerhouse.

Along came the Internet, which values individual searches over general-interest curation. Now, consumers can decide for themselves what’s important enough to read, without the benefit of an editor’s opinion. The Internet also made publishing more accessible, and thanks to search, anyone with an Internet connection can potentially reach a digital following as large as that of a “legitimate” publisher. If print is, generally speaking, an editor’s medium, the Internet largely belongs to individual writers.

**READER’S DIGEST AND THE iPAD: A PERFECT MATCH**

Reader’s Digest didn’t stand still as digital publishing took hold. In 2007, Reader’s Digest was one of the first magazines to appear on the Kindle and today, Reader’s Digest is the top-selling magazine on Amazon’s e-reader. Reader’s Digest is also available on the Barnes and Noble Nook, the Sony Reader and the RIM Blackberry Playbook. The magazine also has a website, an active Facebook page and has several branded apps on the iPhone, as well, with an Android app in the works. But perhaps no platform has suited the 89-year-old magazine quite as well as the Apple iPad, where Reader’s Digest launched its app in February.

“The realization that we live in a world of too much information and need a trusted, reliable source to hone it down, to curate and aggregate for us in a way that still has some surprise and delight built into it has always been the Reader’s Digest essence,” said Marilyn Jacobs, vice president and general manager. “In some ways, it was waiting for the iPad all this time as a new tool that could support that kind of brand.”

The iPad experience is very different from the Internet, Jacobs noted. Whereas the desktop PC revolves around search and
information retrieval, the iPad reintroduced the idea of reading, browsing and discovering for the sake of discovery. Jacobs recalled the debut of the iPad, with Apple CEO Steve Jobs leaning back onstage in his chair, legs crossed, iPad propped up against his leg, tapping away. “The iPad’s shape and aesthetic creates a great reading experience and people fall in love again with the act of reading,” she said.

It’s also an experience that is not immune to people actually paying for content. As with the Kindle, consumers can’t operate the iPad without a store account. “There’s something about the iPad—the interface, Apple’s aesthetic and the halo effect of the brand where it feels like a premium experience,” Jacobs said. People who paid hundreds of dollars for their iPad are investing in receiving content, whether it’s Angry Birds or Reader’s Digest. “If you’re inside a premium experience, consumer behavior research says you’ll be willing to pay more for it because you ascribe to it the value of a premium experience,” said Jacobs.

In response to customer demand, Reader’s Digest began selling subscriptions to its iPad version in August for $14.99 a year or $1.99 monthly (individual copies are $3.99). Print subscribers can read the iPad edition free for six months.

REMEMBRING CURATION

Reader’s Digest’s iPad app manages to feel native to the device, yet maintains the publication’s traditional personality, down to its emphasis on inspirational profiles, the military, humor and its Word Power vocabulary quiz. “It’s both of the original yet somehow different and unique. Everything old is new again,” Jacobs said. Editors and designers have also been reinvigorated by the iPad’s brand of storytelling, she said, and they are having “the time of their lives” generating video and audio and thinking of new ways to bring the magazine to life on the iPad.

A good example of how the editors re-imagine Reader’s Digest for the iPad is a special section in the September issue that commemorates the 10th anniversary of the tragedy of 9/11. One of the hallmarks of Reader’s Digest has always been its poignant personal articles by or about ordinary people, but the iPad app shows just how emotionally resonant multimedia storytelling can be. The videos of people describing their response to losing loved ones and how the event affected their lives—particularly a teenage girl reading the letter she wrote to the father she lost—are inspirational, earthbreaking and memorable in a way that transcends words.

‘THEY DON’T JUST CONVERT THEMSELVES’

Translating a magazine from print to the e-readers and especially to tablets is one of the more arduous tasks facing publishers today. “They don’t just convert themselves out of a PDF,” said Jacobs. She said that Reader’s Digest does a lot of the conversion work itself and delivers a converted product to Barnes and Noble, Amazon and Apple.

“Many times publishers are happy just to get the first issue out the door. You’re excited that you built a slideshow and added a video,” said Laura Capasso, global director, publishing technology and content operations. Reader’s Digest put a lot of interactivity into its iPad edition from the start, and the February issue had six videos and a lot of interactivity. “You continually build on that and look at what else is available in the marketplace, what other people have done, and you think about some features that are core to your publication and how you can present them differently.”

For instance, while Word Power had been stuck on a printed page for years, on the iPad, users can now listen to how the words in the quiz are pronounced, tap to select their answer and then tap Submit at the end. “It becomes interactive, bordering on gaming,” said Capasso. “You really have to push yourself to think about reconstructing it.”

WORKFLOW

In anticipation of the iPad conversion of the print magazine, there’s more planning up front, Capasso said, and Reader’s Digest starts to conceptualize the iPad edition even while it’s working on the print maga-
We’re thinking in terms of interactive devices, so instead of sourcing a single image for a story, we’re sourcing multiple images,” she said.

“Any photo shoots now also include video, and editors have to prep photographers on interview questions, sometimes before the article itself is finished,” said Ann Powell, managing editor of the U.S. edition of Reader’s Digest. “The iPad edition carries 10-20% more content than the print edition. For example, in the print magazine, we run six ‘mini excerpts’ of new books usually a paragraph for each book. But in most cases, with a little prodding, the book publishers will give us the first chapter to include in the iPad edition. We add a hyperlink to Amazon.com at the end of the text, so if a reader is hooked, he or she can click and download the entire book.”

After the print issue closes, Reader’s Digest feeds into two workflows: one supporting e-readers and one supporting tablets. “On the reader side, we extract all of our content to XML using the PRISM standard from IDEAl-liance,” Capasso said. All of Reader’s Digest’s content is stored in an XML repository that allows staff to choose article assets and compile them in a reader edition. “We export that to support the Kindle Mobi file format and ePub,” she said.

For the tablet issue, scripts are used to lift content from the print-centric layouts into iPad templates. Editors then redesign the stories for the iPad. Creative staff add interactive elements such as slide-shows, videos and some components that the publication has built in HTML that are reusable features issue to issue. Then it’s published to Adobe’s DPS technology.

Creating the iPad edition was not easy. “Basically, we added a whole other layer to almost every person’s job, especially the photo department and art department, but also the copy and research staff, and the editors,” said Managing Editor Powell. “We added a couple of additional workflows to the design of the iPad and also the editing of videos. We’ve had to work out who is responsible for what, how to communicate, how to even proof an app. And because our sales and marketing departments are also new to this game, we have had to wear many hats. Our workdays have been long. But the creative rewards have been tremendous. Each time a new issue goes on sale I see staff posting links on their personal Facebook pages. I see genuine pride and satisfaction.”

Now that it has several issues under its belt, Capasso said, Reader’s Digest is “on the verge of packaging up everything we’ve built from a technology and process perspective for the U.S. Reader’s Digest magazine and making it available to our international editions so that small offices that don’t have a lot of resources can at least get away from the ‘page turner’ and get into the iPad scroll and swipe format.” Additionally, Reader’s Digest Association is looking toward its other U.S.-based titles, including Every Day with Rachael Ray and Taste of Home, for future iPad editions.

Reader’s Digest hopes the iPad will help create something of a renaissance for traditional print publishers. “A great user experience, easily delivered, will have consumers reading more and be willing to discover content across a publisher’s total asset base,” said Jacobs. “It’s up to the publishers to create the right product.”