



Collection of “dime novel” and “nickel weeklies” covers. Source:
<https://pulpmags.wordpress.com/>

The Pulp Magazines Project. Patrick Belk, Nathan Madison: 2011. <<http://pulpmags.org/>>

The first generation of cooperative, open-access libraries were text-based transcriptions like *Project Gutenberg*. In the past 20 years digital imaging equipment has improved while the price for it has plummeted. The creation of digital storage/server operations with capacity measured in gigabytes and terabytes (soon in terms of petabytes) makes possible the capture and presentation of image-based files that previously were possible only on microfilm.

The Pulp Magazines Project is an open-access digital collection of pulp magazine content “for the study and preservation of one of the twentieth century’s most influential print culture forms: the all-fiction pulpwood magazine.” The editors/owners of the site, Dr. Patrick Belk and Nathan Madison, deserve credit for launching ambitiously into a void left by other large-scale pulp-magazine projects. Its contributors intend to capture and mount cover-to-cover content; its scope circumscribes the entire genre in a fifty-year swath between 1896 and 1946.

As of the date this review was written, site content includes 320 discrete full-text digital objects scattered through serial titles. The site also provides contextual and historical writing

from a variety of contributors, including short, informational comments on pulp-magazine publishing history. For those studying literature of the early twentieth century, the site will be a credible asset, a venue for discrete materials that are frequently difficult and often impossible to locate.

PMP's off-and-running success, however, has lagged and today the site should be regarded as a work-in-progress that has not progressed further than its earliest stages. The pace is not due to lack of interest but of scale. *PMP* first posted content in 2011. Contributions of new digital material have been comparatively slow. Out of the thousands of titles and tens of thousands of pulp-magazine issues produced, capturing 320 is an important start but a mere start nonetheless.

The project's rationale for creating a digital preservation/access platform runs headlong into one of the key problems facing popular-literature resources: individual magazines are now downright rare. They were intended, even in their heyday, as nothing more than bound ephemera. They were thrown away as often as they were bought, so their survival rate is low. Today pulp-magazine issues are discovered mostly as single issues and by happenstance. There are comparatively few lengthy runs of individual titles accessible to scholars. Most actual collections exist in private hands and in a handful of institutions. Even so holdings of individual magazine titles are inherently incomplete. The project could profitably scan the Library of Congress pulp-magazine collection (microfilmed and discarded in the hand-wringing "Slow Fires" period of the 1980s), but contributions of that scale would require a huge investment. The site seeks to address that limiting factor by accepting images as they can be acquired an issue at a time rather than an entire title at a time. Thus the site will grow slowly, perhaps glacially, but sustainably.

The broader problem facing *PMP* is one of scale. For comparison's sake, its intended scope overlaps with index sites like the [FictionMags Index](#), but at present *PMP* is largely the work of a single academic and its contents are scanned directly from surviving copies of individual issues. *FictionsMags Index*, however, is a collective effort of a rather large, active interest group. The latter provides cross-indexed issue, author (including pen names) and title indices to over 140,000 magazine issues from better than 6,000 English-language serial-fiction titles. This comparison is not intended to minimize *PMP*, it is rather a reckoning point for just how early the site is in its history.

Will it succeed? Its sponsors have certainly set out a Herculean task, one that narrower and



better-funded projects have already begun (such as Syracuse University's [Street & Smith archive](#), Stanford University's [Dime Novels and Penny Dreadfuls](#), and Michigan State University's [Russel B. Nye collection](#)). Projects of this scope, particularly cooperative ones, are difficult to maintain. For awhile, perhaps, the value of the site will be most easily measured not as a digital platform but as an introductory and exemplary illustrated guide to the genre (through its subpages [Books & Essays](#) and the [Digital Archives Hub](#)) which direct new researchers to the literature and more established sites. However, content is king and as contributions continue its value as an access platform to the stories themselves will increase. A third problem is the very real issue of digital-platform sustainability. *PMP* is a terrific example of the enticing trap that digital media offers to the enthusiastically unwary: it is easy to design and reasonably inexpensive to build an open-resource site around a great idea, but difficult and expensive both to fulfil its scope (*i.e.*, supply content) and to sustain it in perpetuity. Web resources are still immediate assets; to provide genuine permanence in digital platforms digital resources must have what commercial publishers discovered long ago: a fiscally stable institutional platform and commitment to the resource and longer-lived than the founder. The digital world does not hold still and platforms cannot be static. Even with institutional backing the scale of effort (and investment) needed to maintain image-rich digital resources like *PMP* is prohibitive. Similar grant-funded projects in popular culture have become moribund. Those of us fascinated by popular culture and its literature certainly wish the *Pulp Magazine Project* well.

Richard Saunders
Southern Utah University