

## Soap Operas and the History of Fan Discussion: Part III of V

Written by Sam Ford  
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### The Soap Opera Press

One factor that changed the way soap operas relate to their fans is the creation of the soap opera press. While soaps were often covered in some degree by TV Guide and certain big events might be mentioned in newspapers or magazines, daytime--despite its visibility and popularity--was left behind, even as primetime television programming was granted an increasing amount of attention from serious critics.

While there is much less scholarly attention given to the artistry of soaps as compared to the best primetime has to offer, there is also much less serious consideration of soaps in the popular press. This niche is filled somewhat by magazines focusing particularly on soaps that are now a staple of checkout lines in grocery stores. Whereas previous forms of fan communication involved private exchanges (local discussions, fan mail, and fan clubs) and most publications did not regularly report or include reader letters about soap operas, soap opera magazines provided a new forum in which the reception of soap operas could become texts themselves, through official industry news and behind-the-scenes information, official columnists, and fan letters and polls.

Soap Opera Digest was launched in November 1975 as a monthly magazine. In addition to publishing both "official" critiques from staff writers and fan perspectives on the various daytime serial dramas, SOD created an annual set of awards, similar to the Daytime Emmy Awards, for daytime serial dramas in 1977. The launch of the magazine also coincides with the height of soaps popularity, when shows switched from a live format to a taped program (thus increasing the quality and reliability of acting and reducing the chance for obvious production errors) and an expansion from 30 minutes to one hour that also caused a doubling of most casts.

SOD became bi-weekly in 1979. News Corp. bought the magazine in 1989 and then launched a sister publication, Soap Opera Weekly, as a weekly companion to SOD. The publications were sold to K-III in 1991, which has now changed its name to Primedia. In 1997, SOD became a weekly publication as well. In May 2007, Primedia sold both of its soaps magazines--and more than 70 magazines in all from its "Enthusiast Media" division--to Source Interlink.

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According to a personal interview I conducted with Lynn Liccardo, the intent of SOW when the magazine was first launched, according to fans, was to provide a more nuanced and critical examination of soap opera texts, relying less on an analysis of hair, makeup, style, and the physical attributes of actors and more on analysis and commentary. However, that focus gradually shifted so that much of the material in both

SOD

and

SOW

is similar. Liccardo formerly published in the magazine on occasion before its gradual shift to a less serious critical engagement with soap opera texts.

According to [SOW 's Wikipedia page](#) , the magazine shifted its focus in 2000 "to include coverage of prime-time drama and reality series with soap themes and continuing storylines." In the first half of 2006, SOD was listed with a total circulation of 527,925, with 345,640 subscribers and 182,285 newsstand single copy sales, the 58th most popular magazine on the newsstand.

SOW

was listed with a circulation of 239,704, with 101,386 subscribers and 138,318 newsstand single copy sales, the 82nd most popular magazine on the stand. Both sets of data was presented by [the Magazine Publishers of America Web site](#)

These numbers make them the 10th and 11th most popular weekly magazines on the newsstand, behind the various tabloids, Woman's World, and TV Guide. This information was part of [a media kit](#) from USA Today highlighting the performance of Sports Weekly and listed ABC Fas-Fax from 30 June 2006 as its source.

According to [The Millard Group](#) , SOD's subscribers are 83 percent female and 17 percent male with the median age of 50 and median household income of \$38,000.

SOW

's subscribers are listed as 84 percent female and 16 percent male with an average age of 50, according to

[a similar Millard report](#)

. The shift in using median age in one list and average age in the other may indicate a desire to have the lowest age possible listed.

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Competitor Bauer Publishing runs its own weekly magazine called Soaps In Depth, which focuses on ABC soap operas one week and CBS the next. An April 2006

[press release](#)

touted 71,405 subscribers for CBS Soaps In Depth and 79,665 subscribers for ABC Soaps In Depth

In the first half of 2006, the ABC version was listed as having 272,672 verified weekly readers, with 60,760 verified subscribers and 211,912 newsstand sales, while the CBS version has 249,514 verified weekly readers, with 56,220 verified subscribers and 193,294 newsstand sales, the 53rd and 57th most popular magazines on the newsstand. This information was also part of

[the USA Today media kit](#)

. Bauer also publishes such supermarket line staples as Woman's World

, Life & Style Weekly

, and In Touch

There have also been several other soap opera magazines, now defunct, in the past few decades. These magazines have a much higher readership than their subscriptions and newsstand sales would indicate, since many people flip through the issues while in the store without ever purchasing it, trying to find the few relevant pages about their soap in particular.

The soap opera press provides enough critical information for fans to consider them relevant and still play a part in the modern interactions between audience members and the show's creative and marketing staff. However, one cannot take lightly the impact that these publications have served over the past three decades, even if there is a lack of critical engagement in these weekly publications.

The fact that they are the one source that focuses on American soap operas on a consistent basis drives a lot of fan interest in what the magazines include and provides a space through which the shows can send news to fans through interviews and scoops; in return, fans have

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been able to have their opinions expressed on a national stage, through polls and published letters. These publications might not have completely satisfied the fan community's interest in "official" and fan-produced media about the soap opera industry, but they provided the first forum for such writing nonetheless.