

## Digitizing the Banal The Politics of Recovery in Periodical Studies

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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# Digitizing the Banal: The Politics of Recovery in Periodical Studies

HANNAH MCGREGOR

## Introduction: On Banality

**B**ETWEEN 1910 AND 1921, the Winnipeg-based household magazine *The Western Home Monthly* opened most issues with an informal editorial feature called “A Chat with Our Readers.” Written in an anonymous editorial “we” that often expanded to include the reader, this section was characteristic of the magazine’s combination of domestic coziness and explicit nationalism, hailing a public of western Canadians with an investment in the national project. An example is how frequently the chat describes the magazine’s readership through the metaphor of the household. The January 1920 chat, for instance, features a letter from “a lady reader” that places the magazine physically within the home: “In every farm home in which I have yet been I have seen *The Monthly*, and the farmer of to-day is ‘no slouch’ when it comes to home comforts, as I daresay you know.” The letter goes on to link the magazine to other comforts of the home, such as pianos and “labor-saving devices in the kitchen” (3). In May 1920, the editors extended this metaphor of their readership as a household:

Every subscriber represents a good Western home — the very home that looms to-day as Canada’s brightest hope.

Every additional name to our subscription list strengthens the bulwark of home builders, home dwellers and home lovers. If you agree with us that the home is the magnet towards which all good things should gravitate, then you are in a special sense eligible for membership in the great family that constitute our readers. . . . Our mail box, in a very special way, reflects the minds of our readers — and how the striving for an ideal home is the predominating thought. . . . What is your home problem? If you are a woman with home interests read the *Woman’s Quiet Hour*, *Young Woman and Her Problem*, *Mother’s Section*, *Kitchen Department*, *Home Doctor*, *Fashions and Patterns*, etc. The young folks and even the small chil-

dren in your home will find interest and profit in the special department arranged for them by Bobby Burke. The man of the house can keep abreast of current thought through the Editorial pages, many special articles, Philosopher, What the World is Saying, etc. (1)

The magazine itself, with its familiar monthly features, became a spatial construct that could be mapped against the organization of “a good Western home” and, by extension, the nation. Thus, the emergent national public of Canadians was hailed through a distinctly domestic metaphor that, while encompassing the entire family, clearly registered most strongly as a feminized space, since “home problem[s],” in the editorial’s logic, were the purview of women. The public hailed by *The Western Home Monthly* became at once intimate and universal, encompassing the space of women’s domestic sociability while expanding to include the concerns of the whole family/nation. In other issues, the nationalism was made more explicit — most notably in “The Power of the National Magazine” in July 1920 — but the domestic and sentimental registers of the nation remained.

Yet, despite the role that the editors of this magazine clearly imagined for themselves in the formation of Canadian culture, their work has been all but forgotten. Fraser Sutherland’s *The Monthly Epic: A History of Canadian Magazines 1789-1989*, one of the few extended studies of magazines in Canada, makes a mere passing reference to it as “the only general-interest regional magazine to achieve national status” (6). Published in Winnipeg between 1899 and 1932, *The Western Home Monthly* featured very few authors who would be recognized as canonical or significant today; compared with similar American magazines, it was technologically belated, still printing in black and white after competitors to the south had moved to glossy colour; even compared with other Canadian magazines, it has been deemed less culturally significant. This critical dismissal of *The Western Home Monthly* might stem from a tendency in Canadian literary and cultural history to dismiss culture from the Prairies and the Maritimes as “regional,” whereas that produced in Ontario is uncomplicatedly Canadian (Fiamengo 264). This would account for why Toronto-based magazines such as *Chatelaine* and *Canadian Home Journal* have been studied more extensively, particularly since greater cultural prestige increases a magazine’s likelihood of being thoroughly archived (and digitized) and thus of being studied later by critics. Yet the contemporary popularity of *The*

*Western Home Monthly* — reaching 180,000 subscribers in 1932 and becoming the most widely circulated household magazine in the country — indicates to us now that its readers found it far from insignificant. Subscription numbers alone suggest, as Patrick Collier argues, “that the periodical is valuable simply because it exists — because it once performed some desirable functions for some number of people” (109).

What does recovery work look like for a print archive such as *The Western Home Monthly* that is generic, repetitive, rural, domestic — that is, as the title of this essay suggests, *banal*? Margaret Cohen argues that the expansion of archival research invites a reconsideration of what constitutes “excellence” in the literary archive (51), and Collier points out that the digitization of new periodical archives is an opportunity to reconsider how we define the significance of historical texts (94). But such an expansion requires new theoretical tools that will make sense of our new archives without forcing them to conform to inapposite categories of value.

Banality — the quality of being conventional, commonplace, and everyday — links several of the characteristics that at once define *The Western Home Monthly* and doom it, and so many magazines like it, to apparent historical irrelevance. Those characteristics include its focus on regional and often rural issues, its structural emphasis on domesticity and the concerns of the household, its tendency to publish generic fiction and formulaic columns rather than innovative writing, and its very slow pace in undertaking any kind of formal innovation. Banality also highlights how feminized popular culture is often unperceivable as valuable through established critical paradigms and how the pleasures of generic and serial media might become illegible through a critical gaze focused on the curious and the remarkable. But banality does not just evoke those elements of cultural production that are often ignored. For many of us, it also recalls Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, which attempts to characterize the mindlessness of twentieth-century evil.

I am drawn to the idea of banality because it seems to provide a conceptual framework for bringing together women’s intimate publics, the violence of the colonial nation-state, and the magazine as a form of new media. It offers a way to think of the cultural production of white women as worthy of study without simplistically “recovering” or redeeming it, to analyze the function of nationalism as discursive

violence without simply declaring ourselves postnational, and to devote attention to a marginalized form of print culture without attempting to legitimate it through the cultural capital of established fields or figures.

This article proceeds in three parts. It begins with a consideration of *The Western Home Monthly* as a tool of technological nationalism that both articulates and embodies the idea of Canada as a modern nation. It then links this modernity to domesticity by looking at how the magazine is structured both as a familiar national print public and as what Lauren Berlant calls an intimate public. In so doing, it asks how technologies of the nation were realized via feminized technologies of the household. Next it turns to the question of reading methods, considering the methodological challenges presented by the banality of the periodical form alongside the new affordances of working with digital collections. Finally, it offers a sample reading of the inside-front-cover advertisements from 1920, the year when those ads became full colour, to demonstrate the potential value of reading through and with banality. The conclusion considers how banality complicates ongoing discussions of digitization, canonicity, recovery, and cultural value.

### The Banality of Paper and Ink

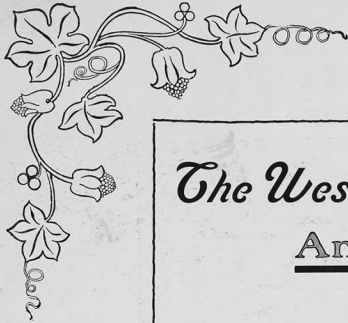
*The Western Home Monthly's* claims that magazines are a nation-building technology that "stands for national unity and sentiment" will sound familiar to anyone who has read Maurice Charland's influential 1986 essay "Technological Nationalism" or to anyone who is familiar with Canada's 1951 Massey Commission, which called on the state to fund and promote a unified national culture as a form of Cold War defence (Godard 211). Charland's essay critiques a pervasive "rhetoric of technological nationalism in Anglophone Canada which ascribes to technology the capacity to create a nation by enhancing communication," a rhetoric that Charland describes as "insidious" because "it ties a Canadian identity, not to its people, but to their mediation through technology" (197). The magazine's repeated emphasis on unity, on the nation as a household, seems to emphasize the value of nationalism itself without explicitly stating what characterizes the nation in question. Although the content of the magazine could be read as an articulation of the content of the nation, in the chats it is infrastructure that matters. The emergent Canadian nation relies on institutions such as magazines

and manufacturers' associations — and, as the July 1919 chat makes clear, both magazines and manufacturers rely on advertising.

This chat, entitled “The Value of Advertising,” consists largely of an explanation to readers of why they ought to be reading the ads. Advertising reduces the cost of consumer goods by creating “a broad market for them, making millions of sales at little price and little profits. And so,” the chat continues, “you owe very much to advertising,” particularly “a thorough reading” (1). Never stated, but certainly implied, is the fact that the magazine itself is also a kind of merchandise made widely and cheaply available through advertising. Sold at a below-cost subscription rate, *The Western Home Monthly*, like all commercial magazines of the period, sustained itself by selling ad space. “The Value of Advertising” is thus something of an instruction manual on the proper use of a magazine that once again places technology (advertising, the magazine) above content (what is advertised, the editorial content) insofar as the former is able to generate the capacity for communication and thus community. But *The Western Home Monthly* was not just advertising itself as a technology of nation building and a source of ads for new household goods. It was also advertising its own participation in Winnipeg's rapidly modernizing print industry.

Between 1899, when *The Western Home Monthly* was launched, and 1932, when it was renamed *The National Home Monthly*, printing became a central part of Winnipeg's identity as an emerging hub of commerce — an identity to which the magazine's parent company, Stovel Printing Company, was keen to tie itself. In the three intervening decades, the number of presses and printing companies listed in “Henderson's Directories” had ballooned from twelve to seventy-three, and Stovel had added to its holdings the subsidiary Home Publishing Company.<sup>1</sup> In a 1931 promotional publication — grandiosely titled *Historical Outline of the House of Stovel* — the company bragged about the central location of Winnipeg, which “makes it ideal for quick and economical distribution of printed matter” (30). As the pamphlet details each production department, and the technologies to be found therein, it emphasizes the company's modernity, linking it to scientific innovation, progress, newness, and efficiency (15).

This enthusiasm to link printing technology to Winnipeg's modernity is evident in the pages of the magazine as well. As early as November 1903, the editors dedicated an entire inside front cover — prime adver-



See Page 21.

# The Western Home Monthly

## Announcement



The Western Home Monthly appears in enlarged form, and it is hoped that the enlargement may meet with the approval that is looked for. Our efforts in the past have met with such favor that we decided upon extension, and now the paper appears in new form. The pages have been lengthened somewhat and the number run up to twenty-four. This, with the addition of a cover, gives a paper nearly twice as large as it has hitherto been.

### Paper and Ink.

Fill out the slip inside this paper. Enclose it and Fifty Cents (50c.) in the *within envelope and post it.*

The Western Home Monthly and the Farmer's Business Guide will then be sent you. ❖ ❖ ❖

Good book paper has been substituted for the news, and the cover from this on will be printed in two colors, with a new design on the front each issue. Better ink will also be used, so that the press work will be superior.

### Amplly Illustrated.

As will be observed, we are enabled to give more illustrations and these will be of a much better nature than formerly. To this end, we ask the co-operation of all subscribers. Photographs (amateur or otherwise) will be received with pleasure and paid for according to value. With each photograph there should be a short sketch of what it pictures, etc.

The Western Home Monthly has for some time been the only illustrated family paper printed in the Canadian West—a distinction which is of considerable moment. With the step in advance now made it is more than ever THE illustrated paper of the West.

### The Departments.

In the past we have made the story department a special feature and this will be continued. Short original stories by local writers will appear. Contributions along this line will be gladly received, and, upon approval, remuneration will be made.

The various departments that have appeared in the past will be continued, and from time to time these will be added to, giving The Western Home Monthly increased merit, and more value to the homes of the West.

### Special Articles.

In addition to our regular departments, we are making arrangements for a number of special articles upon timely and interesting topics. These will be in the hands of specialists, our aim being to give only such articles as carry authority with them. Many of these we hope to have illustrated, so that they may be of greater value along the line of instruction.

Twelve Additional Pages.

Increase in Size of Paper.

Printed on Book Paper.

Printed with Better Ink.

Colored Cover.

More Illustrations.

New Departments.

Special Articles.

Any of these improvements would be a good step forward if made during the twelvemonth, but their introduction has been made at one time, and thus the paper is placed in the front rank at once.

At any time it will give us pleasure to receive suggestions from young or old, for the further improvement of Western Canada's Illustrated Family Paper, and thus increase its usefulness.

### A Valuable Premium.

In addition to all the improvements mentioned, we are giving a valuable premium, which in itself is worth more than the price of subscription. In the advertisement on page 19 there appears our clubbing offers and on

page 21 is notice regarding the FREE GIFT to subscribers. It is a book called The Farmer's Business Guide, and is edited by a lawyer of considerable repute along matters of law for the farmer. The ability of the editor gives it value and enables us to place a work before the public carrying authority with it.

A distinctive advantage which the work will carry with it is the fact that it will not reach our subscribers second hand—that is, as a work gotten out at some distant point with a little matter of local interest added and the whole pawned off upon the public as of special local advantage. The Business Guide is being compiled by a Western lawyer of good standing, who is editing it from a Western standpoint. The printing will all be done upon the premises of The Stovel Co., who are printers for the Home Publishing Co., and who are now largely interested in our company. From this it will be seen that it will be a Western Farmer's Business Guide, edited by a Westerner, printed by Westerners, and issued direct to the Western public.

The price of The Guide is \$1, but subscribers to The Western Home Monthly get it. The Monthly, and almost any weekly newspaper called for, for the sum of \$1.25.

### To Advertisers.

The improvements undertaken should prove of decided advantage to our advertisers. At present there is no other publication in the West reaching a greater number of homes than The Western Home Monthly, and the enlargement of the paper will have tendency to call for its introduction to a still greater number of families. In this way it will be more than ever a very efficient medium through which to talk to the public.

SUBSCRIBE FOR WESTERN CANADA'S ILLUSTRATED HOME MONTHLY.

The Home Publishing Company,  
Stovel Building, Winnipeg, Man.



See page 9 for Unprecedented Offer.

See page 19 for Our Clubbing Offers.

Figure 1: Inside front cover of the November 1903 issue. This and all subsequent images of *The Western Home Monthly* are courtesy of Peel's Prairie Provinces (peel.library.ualberta.ca), a digital initiative of the University of Alberta Libraries.

tising space, as will become evident below — to extolling the magazine’s technical improvements, from paper and ink quality to sheer length. The audience for this ad was in part advertisers, whom they hailed directly: “The improvements undertaken should prove of decided advantage to our advertisers. At present there is no other publication in the West reaching a greater number of homes than *The Western Home Monthly*, and the enlargement of the paper will have tendency to call for its introduction to a still greater number of families” (Announcement) (Figure 1). At the centre of the page, however, is an enumeration of the magazine’s new features addressed to readers and advertisers alike, boasting of “Twelve Additional Pages,” “Increase in Size of Pages,” and “More Illustrations,” among other improvements. The ad clearly establishes a connection between the emerging public of western Canadian readers and the sophistication of print technologies.

Decades later, in the September 1929 issue, this thematic link between print technology and urban modernity was still at the forefront of the magazine’s self-promotion. In another full-page ad, the Stovel Company juxtaposes an itemized list of the company’s “14 Services” with a story of western Canadian pioneers and frames them with contrasting images of the city itself (“Four Decades”) (Figure 2). These twinned landscapes conflate the rise of Winnipeg as an urban space with the technologies through which that space is represented: print above, photography below. The copy, meanwhile, inserts the establishment of the House of Stovel into the history of the settlement of the West:

The census of 1871 gave Manitoba’s population as 11,693. There were only 1,565 white people. . . .

In 1889 — eighteen years following the incorporation of Winnipeg, capital of the Keystone Province of the Confederation — the House of Stovel was founded by three brothers. . . .

Through all the changes in the intervening years (the present population of Greater Winnipeg is 336,202) the House of Stovel has kept in the vanguard of the City’s progress. Today their own building occupies one block long, half a block deep and three stories high, containing in all over eighty-four thousand square feet of floor space. (“Four Decades”)

The copy here draws overt links between the city’s modernity, communication technologies, and a growing population, especially of white





Early Winnipeg as viewed from St. Boniface across the Red River in 1859

# Four Decades of Progress!

## 1889-1929

**14**  
**SERVICES**  
UNDER ONE ROOF  
AND  
ONE MANAGEMENT

1. Copy.
2. Art-work—Black and White or Full Color.
3. Color Photography.
4. Photo Engraving.
5. Wood Cuts.
6. Electrotyping and Stereotyping.
7. Typography—Hand or Machine Set.
8. Printing—Platen or Letterpress.
9. Photo-Offset Lithography.
10. Copper-Plate Printing.
11. Die Stamping.
12. Map Publishing.
13. Bookbinding.
14. Mailing.

CARRY the mind's eye back about half a century and there commences the most remarkable example of City building on this Continent. It is the story of Winnipeg which has grown from an Indian Trading Post to the Grain Centre of the world and the Metropolis of the last Great West.

¶ The first cabinet of Manitoba was formed on June 12, 1871. The census of 1871 gave Manitoba's population as 11,695. There were only 1,565 white people. Winnipeg boasted about 215 souls.

¶ Communication was by Red River Cart over land to St. Paul. No regular stage route was established. Mail came once a week. There was no Bank, no Post Office, no Lawyer, one Doctor, one Church, one little Newspaper, one Policeman and about 20 buildings in Winnipeg. The only currency in existence was Hudson's Bay Company's notes.

¶ In 1889—eighteen years following the incorporation of Winnipeg, capital of the Keystone Province of the Confederation—the House of Stovel was

founded by three brothers. The little print plant rented space in the old Spencer Block on Portage Avenue at twenty-five dollars per month, with the front third of the office sublet to a Real Estate firm.

¶ Through all the changes in the intervening years (the present population of Greater Winnipeg is 356,202) the House of Stovel has kept in the vanguard of the City's progress. Today their own building occupies one block long, half a block deep and three stories high, containing in all over eighty-four thousand square feet of floor space.

¶ Thus, is this organization keeping abreast with the development of the West and the multitudinous needs of the thousands of clients across Canada, whom it serves.

**STOVEL COMPANY LIMITED**  
WINNIPEG      MANITOBA  
"A COMPLETE PRINTING ESTABLISHMENT GROWING GREATER YEAR BY YEAR"

Winnipeg—TODAY. Photo taken from the same point as the first reproduction



Figure 2: Ad for the Stovel Company, September 1929.

people. In the final lines of the copy, the ad also links Winnipeg's modernity to the nation, emphasizing Stovel's ability to "[keep] abreast with the development of the West and the multitudinous needs of the thousands of clients across Canada, whom it serves" (95). Thus, Winnipeg,

ever more modern and ever more white, seems to function in part as a metonym for Canada as a whole.

Via this ad, the magazine positioned itself explicitly as a form of technological nationalism in which the very capacity for communication became synonymous with the existence of a national culture. In turn, those technologies — most iconically the radio and the railway — became means of extending colonial power westward. As Charland explains, technological nationalism links communication technologies to state power; the railway established political control over the west by fostering immigration, discouraging American annexation, and “permit[ting] Ottawa to establish its military presence in the west, as it did when suppressing the Métis rebellion” of 1869 (199). Modern print technology, like the railway, facilitated new forms of cultural production and so came to stand for the nation itself as capable of communication.

### The Banality of Domesticity

The systems that I have been describing thus far might seem to be far from banal, but of course the insidious normalization of colonialism is a banal undertaking in the Arendtian sense. In “The Banality of Colonialism: Encountering Artifacts of Genocide and White Supremacy in Vancouver Today,” Timothy J. Stanley tracks the saturation of structural racism into the very fabric of Canadian culture, including the names of institutions like my own: Simon Fraser is remembered by the Nlaka’pamux “for the rape of a 16-year-old girl” (151). As Stanley points out, dominant Canadian history is structured by “selective remembering, and deliberately engineered forgetting,” both of which are tools of colonialism as an ongoing cultural project (143). He concludes that the Canadian nation-state is banal not only “in the sense of being common or ordinary” but also “in the same sense with which Hannah Arendt spoke of the banality of evil. . . . Evil, she wrote, was no longer radically different from ourselves; it was common, ordinary, banal. So, too, is colonialism” (156). In the case of *The Western Home Monthly*, the banality of colonialism registers in the recurring structures of white supremacy, in this case explicitly marked by the above advertisement as synonymous with expanded communication technologies. It also registers in the dry bureaucratic gesture of counting: 1,565 white people, fourteen services, 84,000 square feet of floor space.

Counting — especially the counting of white people — was at the heart of Canada's white settler bureaucracy in the early decades of the twentieth century. Immigration quota laws focused on categorizing and counting newcomers based upon carefully articulated racial and ethnic types. Perhaps the most infamous example of this kind of categorization is J.S. Woodsworth's *Strangers within Our Gates: Or, Coming Canadians* (1909), which lists immigrants in descending order of desirability. Thus, as Daniel Coleman explains,

The book's chapter list . . . becomes . . . a vertical mosaic, descending in preference from British, Americans, Austria-Hungarians, Balkans, Hebrews, and Italians, before it reaches the cut-off at the White borders of Europe, so that Levantines, Orientals, Negroes, and Indians (both "Hindus" and Amerindians) are considered incompatible with the national project of building a British-based civility. This descending taxonomy of peoples alerts us to the structural contradiction of civility itself, with its vigilant policing of the borders, even when those borders are being conscientiously expanded and liberalized. It also reminds us of how consistently the borders of Canadian civility have been drawn along those of whiteness. (22)

It is impossible to discuss the emergence of a discourse of nationalism without also discussing how the borders of that nation were carefully managed. Although *The Western Home Monthly's* celebration of its own technological sophistication frames the nation in terms of settlement and expansiveness — increasing populations of whites in western cities, increasing capacity for communication — the character of that nation was simultaneously being determined by the deliberate exclusions fundamental to the articulation of whiteness.

It is not quite right, then, to claim that *The Western Home Monthly* was concerned only with extolling its own virtues as a medium. It did not simply hail Canadians *as Canadians* through the creation of a shared print public but also attempted to sketch the contours of what that public would look like — hence the fixation on the metaphor of the family or household. Coleman similarly identifies "the domestic trope of the family" as "a common figure for the naturalness of a nation's organization of its people," a figure that simultaneously marks Canadians as united through a shared nationality and naturalizes gendered differences as part of the very fabric of the nation (52). Simultaneous unity

and naturalized differentiation are spelled out clearly in the May 1920 chat quoted in the introduction, in which the magazine is the household subdivided into departments that mirror the natural spheres of household members. Women are concerned with motherhood, the kitchen, and fashion, men with current events, children with entertainment. As the chat section indicates, the public hailed by the magazine was both intimate and universal, feminized and familial, domestic and national. The capacity of the magazine to address these multiple publics, even to nest multiple publics within one another, comes from the way that their different recurring features can hail different readers and draw them into the conversation afforded by letters to the editor (as the May 1920 chat insists, “A magazine breathes through its correspondence” [1]). In Barbara Green’s words, it is a question of which features “bump shoulders in the crowded columns” (466).

Green’s work on feminist periodicals, with their juxtaposition of “articles on fashion and on suffrage, on cooking and on socialism” (466), highlights how magazines could function not only as a dominant print public or politicized counterpublic but also as what Berlant calls an *intimate* public. Green sees a fruitful link between periodical studies and Berlant’s notion of the intimate public sphere as juxtapolitical, “flourishing in proximity to the political because the political is deemed an elsewhere managed by elites” (2). Recognizing themselves as excluded from the Habermasian public of the coffeehouse, women experience an intimate public as a “space of permission to thrive . . . : permission to live small but to feel large; to live large but to want what is normal too” (3). Berlant reminds us that women’s intimate publics validate the banality of their everyday lives — a banality that both is and is not a problem. After all,

“women’s culture” is distinguished by a view that the people marked by femininity already have something in common and are in need of a conversation that feels intimate, revelatory, and a relief even when it is mediated by commodities, even when it is written by strangers who might not be women, and even when its particular stories are about women who seem, on the face of it, vastly different from each other and from any particular reader. (viii-ix)

In this way, Berlant provides us with a way to think about what happens in the pages of a periodical like *The Western Home Monthly* without

hierarchizing it; after all, “to love conventionality is not only to love something that constrains someone or some condition of possibility: it is another way of talking about negotiating belonging to a world. To love a thing is not only to embrace its most banal iconic forms, but to work those forms so that individuals and populations can breathe and thrive in them or in proximity to them” (3). In this view, the conventionality of a household magazine is not something to read beyond but something to explore for the kinds of belonging and thriving that it allows.

Intimate publics’ mediation of women’s culture via domestic commodities was reflected in the feminization of household management in the twentieth century. Household magazines both produced and reflected this connection between women and domestic commodities through ads that hailed women as responsible for the care and comfort of the home, whereas men, as the May 1920 chat implies, were responsible for “the world.” As I discuss elsewhere, these ads often conflate a romantic image of domestic space with faith in modern technology as a democratizing influence (McGregor and van Orden 158-60). Through the representation of modern technologies as an extension of feminized domestic management, magazines like *The Western Home Monthly* at once produce and seem to offer respite from the banality of women’s lives. Look, for example, at a full-page ad for stoves and ovens, also in the May 1920 issue, that models the same kind of self-evident link between women and domesticity as the chat does when it associates women with “home interests” (Figure 3). The woman in the illustration is one who, the copy informs us, “appreciate[s] good cooking results,” and she is pictured in the midst of achieving those results. The primary emphasis of the copy is not, however, on women’s home interests but on the technological sophistication of the stoves and ovens in question, including a chimney “proved by scientific tests to be exactly the right length for best cooking results” (2). Although this scientific sophistication offers respite from the backbreaking labour of premodern cooking, the romantic illustration places mother and child in an idealized past. This mixture of banality (cooking) and escape from it (the scientific future and the romantic past) is also mirrored in the magazine’s content. Generic fiction and regular columns were punctuated by political editorials and advertisements for modern commodities.

Banality can conceptually draw together colonial violence, intimate publics, and the domestic metaphor of the household at work in much

# NEW PERFECTION

Oil Cook Stoves and Ovens



## Best Cooking Results

THE visible flame, the ease with which the degree of heat can be varied and the fact that the flame stays where it is set make New Perfection Oil Cook Stoves the favorites of all good cooks. Women who appreciate good cooking results, and men who all like to eat good cooking, will find complete satisfaction in New Perfection Oil Cook Stoves.

The Long Blue New Perfection Chimney turns every drop of fuel into clean, useful cooking heat. No smoke, no odors, and absolute relief from coal-hod and ash-pan drudgery are yours with the New Perfection.

New Perfection Oil Cook Stoves are ornaments in every kitchen. They are well made and well finished. For broiling, baking, ironing—for every cooking purpose—summer or winter, the New Perfection Oil Cook Stove has no equal.

The New Perfection Oven insures uniformly good results in baking or roasting. Its glass doors will not steam nor break. Baking always in sight. Uniformity of temperature is maintained throughout the entire oven. It's an inspiration to those who do household baking.

The "New Perfection" is sold in one, two, three and four burner sizes. Ask your dealer for a demonstration of the Long Blue Chimney, or write for New Perfection booklet.

Made in Canada

THE PERFECTION STOVE COMPANY  
LIMITED

Head Office and Factory:  
SARNIA, ONT.

Province of Quebec Branch:  
Drummond Bldg., Montreal, Que.

The Long Blue Chimney proved  
by scientific tests to be exactly  
the right length for best  
cooking results.

Figure 3: Ad for the Perfection Stove Company, May 1920.

of *The Western Home Monthly's* editorial copy. But it is equally important, as the next section argues, to consider not only the banality of the magazine's content but also the banality that defines the periodical structure in general.

## The Banality of Periodical Form

A primary methodological challenge of periodical studies is overabundance: the sheer size of periodical archives, alongside the wide range of content contained within even a single issue, can be overwhelming. Recently digitized through a collaboration with Peel's Prairie Provinces, a digital initiative of the University of Alberta Libraries, *The Western Home Monthly* collection comprises 24,170 pages across thirty-two years of issues. Faced with this much content, many scholars are tempted to turn magazines into search engines, trawling them for undiscovered work by a well-known author, or references to a historical event or person, while ignoring the rest. Collier has bemoaned this urge, arguing that the "object of knowledge" of periodical scholars remains unclear because so many scholars arrive at periodicals with a preconceived sense of what matters; for some, it is "literary or aesthetic modernism," whereas for many others it is "something like 'culture' or 'history' or one of their various subsets" (100). In articulating this argument, Collier cites Franco Moretti, who originated the concept of distant reading, sometimes referred to as computer-assisted reading or "not-reading," a method that values a movement away from the text in favour of attention to patterns that can only be perceived from a distance. As Collier notes, distant reading thus becomes, ideally, a means of overcoming disciplinary bias, of "starting out without having decided in advance where your periodical's value lies" (109).

Interestingly for this discussion, distant reading methods often focus on the most banal details. Stylistic analysis, for example, creates something like an authorial fingerprint by counting the frequency of usually ignored "stop words" such as articles and prepositions, whereas topic modelling generates unremarkable though often significant bags of words that become "topics" only when we interpret them. My collaborator Nicholas van Orden and I used MALLETT (MACHINE Learning for Language Toolkit) to topic-model the 33,099,536-word digitized *Western Home Monthly*, producing statistically relevant clusters of words that tend to appear in the same magazine issues. This process entailed first stripping the text out of the digitized magazine files and then combining it into yearly digests, thus allowing us to track broad shifts across the magazine's thirty-two-year run. The same process could be undertaken at a much more granular level. In his *Mining the Dispatch* project, for example, Robert K. Nelson broke nearly six years of the Richmond

*Daily Dispatch* into over 112,000 separate pieces. Our goal, however, was to sketch the broad concerns of an unreadably large archive, so we decided that yearly digests provided us with adequate detail. We then input those digests into MALLET, which uses the Latent Dirichlet Allocation algorithm to generate clusters of words that co-occur with a statistically meaningful frequency.<sup>2</sup> Part of the process of topic modelling includes experimenting with the number of topics produced as well as the number of words per topic, until meaningful results begin to emerge.

In our topic modelling of *The Western Home Monthly*, we discovered a number of clearly relevant topics. For example, character names from novels clustered together, as did words associated with the emergence of new media technologies, political events, or domestic activities such as baking and sewing. But no matter how we train the program, the most dominant topics — which maintain their dominance for the entirety of the thirty-two-year run that we digitized — have continued to pose a distinct challenge to categorization (Figure 4). With their marked vocabulary overlap (home, years, man, woman, time, offer, etc.) and historical consistency, these topics defy a search for deeper meaning. They insist, instead, on the importance of paying attention to what lies on the surface.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	63	5.84658	home years western good monthly canada great day canadian high people life essay year large man con montreal place				
2	36	4.44573	good girl time day young mrs don make home made things ll house thing asked thought mother man life				
3	24	4.10736	man back time head left half hand ing long made door began don put open town night knew car				
4	77	4.01524	world men time make big canada people great mind years made page things times living life man long st				
5	66	3.61514	women made young means full week buy life write woman give part true inches business make making idea				
6	16	3.42393	days long care man twenty western found case picture late train ready stand call rest night time change red				
7	55	3.04648	white monthly company soft woman made red send house hot fine home fresh ing beautiful garden soap hands flowers				
8	80	2.84516	home child mother father children day love god heart monthly great life western dear round brown homes oo family				
9	46	2.75406	business money year bank interest street matter short trade cent office north fac tie months decided stock department present				
10	57	2.54995	free send write winnipeg price money book great home time farm order address year years treatment offer cure horse				
11	45	2.46591	face turned looked moment thought hair mr voice suddenly heard felt continued hands light laughed told slowly st deep				
12	17	2.2565	ing make large cut season sweet made gold brown tea machine eggs butter pounds flour give ly half wood				
13	98	2.12398	eyes ll blue room knew de limited hand table window chair face ve feet door husband arms arm beauty				
14	38	1.92365	winnipeg mr west ing city sir line summer country dominion present wear strong royal western church building town school				
15	68	1.8629	men monthly farm western skirt girls grain milk home editor women corn white country farmer limited crop advertisers land				
16	29	1.78696	sea white green beautiful bread free peace day church happiness meeting dance fish island sweet ful mine president america				
17	85	1.77198	music st book miss cost beautiful thousands prices winter free receipt en piano wife form sell books good wool				
18	96	1.63577	water good man trouble cents drink blood stomach hot dry health feet states milk paper house cold small pound				
19	50	1.5863	canada great land company states year country provinces canadian de province boat spring history growing manitoba story days increase				
20	79	1.3263	man men winnipeg price mail send piano write good hair handsome make goods world case catalogue fine made vancouver				
21	48	1.29733	man men winnipeg price mail send piano write good hair handsome make goods world case catalogue fine made vancouver				
22	23	1.2122	powder august trail range ma saskatchewan bay mountain corn sunshine wanted coast camp heat stores water vancover pass government				
23	53	1.02581	room color today floor modern furniture wall ed rooms paris walls court france hall type built fur windows body				
24	47	0.88388	ll dog ve em an big gain rifle son joe gun jack many cost wouldnt bottle simple prize				
25	19	0.86571	sugar add water milk cup cream butter salt juice cake egg lemon eggs baking bake beat fruit oven beaten				
26	52	0.8551	river lake indian miles water indians feet north land fish hudson valley country forest trees west canoe stream island				
27	51	0.84158	war service government children british germany canadian united food states national nations nato moral people mother russia toronto france				
28	58	0.8146	cream children beauty toronto silver food material women quality institute yard limited ct erene wonderful read teeth health write				

Figure 4: MALLET output based upon inputting the complete digitized text of *The Western Home Monthly* and training the program to output one hundred topics with twenty words per topic; the screenshot shows the top thirty topics sorted by weight of the topic.



In their introduction to surface reading, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus explain that recent literary criticism has been dominated by “symptomatic reading,” which “argues that the most interesting aspect of a text is what it represses” (3). A key failing of symptomatic reading is how it contorts our collective sense of what constitutes literature by validating those texts that respond best to its methods (7). Surface reading, on the other hand, attends to what is *not* hiding. Cohen describes it variously as “just-reading” and “just-enough reading” (59, 61). This might include attention to the materiality of textual forms, patterns of repetition across large volumes of text, and a text’s “literal meaning” (see Best and Marcus 9-12). This constellation of ideas gestures toward historical understandings of how print moves through the world, the possibilities of computer-assisted distant reading, and the importance of attending to new archives on their own terms rather than distorting them into familiarity.

Such a focus on surfaces is an ideal approach to digitized archives of periodicals, particularly because of how important patterns are to serial media. James Mussell explains that the structure of the magazine as a whole “is invoked through the repetition of certain formal features, issue after issue. It insists on formal continuity, repeated from the past and projected onwards into the future, providing a mediating framework whose purpose is to reconcile difference by presenting new content in a form already known to readers” (347). The regularity of these features is both central to the identity of each periodical and easily missed by readers and critics alike; after all, as Lisa Gitelman reminds us, “the success of all media depends at some level on inattention or ‘blindness’ to the media technologies themselves” (6). The mediating framework of a periodical is so common as to become almost invisible. This banality of periodical form is reproduced, at a few levels, in the dominant topics of *The Western Home Monthly*. For example, the recurring presence of the words *western*, *home*, and *monthly* in topic 63, the most dominant topic, is not just a reminder of the magazine’s identity but also a product of the running header that features the magazine’s title. Other dominant words, such as *young* and *world*, reflect the titles of recurring columns and features, such as “What the World Is Saying” and “Young Man and His Problem,” thus pointing to structure as well as content. In the very meaninglessness of these topics, then, a kind of meaning emerges, but it is one that fails “to signify in fashions that are meaningful using

the criteria of close, formal analysis” (Cohen 59). But how, then, do we make meaning from banal historical periodicals?

Although various methods of distant reading, from topic modelling to word-frequency visualizations, are ideal ways to surface-read a digitized archive, the sheer banality of *The Western Home Monthly* invites other kinds of surface reading. I am particularly interested in the “tenuous” and readerly approaches that Sean Latham has advocated, readings responsive to whatever “potential networks of meaning . . . individual readers . . . activate across the flattened surfaces of these composite texts” (419). This kind of readerly approach recalls Collier’s description of “just-reading” as a method that lets historical periodicals reveal themselves to us as “a strange object whose codes exceed the ones we are equipped to see, [and] as a potential source of new critical inquiries and conversations rather than as a window onto preexisting, valued critical categories” (109). There are many kinds of surfaces in this magazine available to such a reading — covers, for example, or tables of contents — but in the analysis that follows I select a surface that brings together the many resonances of banality, including the domestic coziness of the chat feature, the intimate public of women’s commodity-mediated reading, and the editors’ desire to self-promote through ever more sophisticated print technologies. What follows is a surface reading of the inside-front-cover ads from 1920.

### The Banality of Reading

At this stage in the magazine’s publication, colour printing was still limited. *The Western Home Monthly* did not have full-colour covers until January 1920 and only gradually incorporated glossy colour ads into the rest of the magazine as page inserts. The inside front covers and the inside and outside back covers were the first full-colour ad spaces available, then, and these ads (likely the most expensive in the magazine) were often strikingly designed. The inside front cover was a liminal space, not yet numbered but part of the same spread as the first page, which, throughout 1920, included both the masthead and “A Chat with Our Readers.” Yet it was clearly an important enough space to deserve the magazine’s greatest technological sophistication, where the Stovel Printing Company showed off the printing services that it so enthusiastically linked to the project of colonizing the west. And these ads, in all



Figure 5: Ads for Prue Cottons from January, February, March, June, September, and October 1920; all are inside-front-cover ads.

of their banality, reflect the surface-level topics produced by MALLET, with their focus on things and people, houses and cars.

The first full-colour inside-front-cover ad, in January 1920, is for a product that would occupy this prime ad space for seven of that year's twelve issues: Prue Cottons, by the Dominion Textile Company (Figure 5). These ads share a clear aesthetic: soft, watercolour-style illustrations depict white women and/or children engaged in activities that have no more obvious connection to the product advertised than the fact that these figures are wearing clothes (ostensibly made of cotton and often white as well). These scenes are indexical: that is, they are images "of people, places, or occasions to be somehow associated with the product and its use" (Ohmann 182) rather than images of the product itself. Most of the scenes depicted are domestic and cozy: a nursery full of children engaged in a pillow fight while a maid looks on, for example, or a young woman having her slip hemmed as part of her trousseau. The

The image displays three separate advertisements from the early 1920s. On the left is an ad for Swift's Premium Hams and Bacon, featuring a ham, a plate of food, and a can of Swift ham. The middle ad is for Ford Motor Company of Canada, titled 'It is Dangerous to Use Counterfeit Parts for the Ford', and includes a warning about counterfeit parts and a list of authorized dealers. On the right is an ad for Magic Baking Powder, showing a woman in a black dress holding a tin of the product and a plate of cookies.

Figure 6: Ads for Swift's Premium Hams and Bacon (April 1920), Ford Motor Company of Canada (May 1920), and Magic Baking Powder (July 1920); all are inside-front-cover ads.

copy, meanwhile, does the work of linking index to product, explaining how cotton endures “the rough and tumble of childish affairs” (January) and is ideally suited to “the intimate garments of femininity” (February). These ads tell us several things about the readership of *The Western Home Monthly*: it included women who were responsible for household management; these women considered expense and durability when making purchasing decisions, but they also found femininity, class-signalling, and an aura of nostalgic glamour highly desirable. Berlant’s evocation of intimate publics as spaces where femininity is mediated by commodities and represented in iconically banal forms certainly comes to mind.

Other ads are slightly less straightforward. The September ad depicts a young woman in a white dress standing in a dark wood, mountains visible in the distance. The copy boasts that, “Away from home and out of doors, what can excel cotton for the quick change from travel-stained garments into something fresh, crisp, cool, beautiful and withal inexpensive?” The image does not suggest travel in any conventional way but has a distinctly fairy-tale aesthetic. As such, it evokes archetypal understandings of the young white woman as a figure of innocence and vulnerability, while the Canadian wilderness, distinguished by the pines and snow-peaked mountains, signifies danger and even chaos.<sup>3</sup> The viewer is invited to imagine herself in an overdetermined relationship with her environment, one in which white femininity is inserted

into the colonial narrative as harmless, virtuous, and at risk from her uncivilized surroundings.

Not every ad is so overtly weighted with the ideological baggage of colonialism. The July issue (Figure 6) features an ad for Magic Baking Powder with the large stylized heading “Made in Canada,” an assertion rendered additionally reassuring via the matronly figure holding up a can of the product while pointing at a plate heaped with biscuits (the copy assures us that they are “delicious”). The biscuits function as both an icon — an image of the thing advertised — and an index. That is, the biscuits both contain the product in question (baking powder) and are associated with what is advertised — the importance of buying Canadian-made goods, the links between nationalism and the domestic sphere, the maintenance of a natural order of domestic labour within the Canadian household. In the April issue, an ad for “Swift’s Premium Hams and Bacon” gives us another view of Canadian domestic happiness in the form of a plate of breakfast food wafting scent lines, while the copy insists that the “universal desire to make Easter breakfast a really delightful meal . . . is easily fulfilled by housewives who use” its products. The domestic labour implied in this sentence is missing from the ad itself, with the illustration of breakfast food instead flowing into images of the packaged products and then an idyllic rural scene with a red-roofed farmhouse in the distance, evoking at once the home where this bacon is served and, perhaps, the farm where the pig was raised in the first place. Once again gendered domestic labour is thematically linked to the colonizer’s capacity to transform the surroundings, while the claim to universality (in this case of Easter breakfast ambitions) hails and normalizes the reader as white and middle class.

The most out of place of all the ads is one without index or icon and without any of the gendered domestic connotations of the other eleven examples. In the May 1920 issue, appearing opposite the chat describing *The Western Home Monthly* readers as a household, is a black-and-white ad for Ford. In the context of the other advertisements, the lack of colour or image is a bold and intentional statement. The tone of the ad is serious, announcing at the top the danger of using counterfeit parts before going on, in smaller type, to reinforce that claim with various statistics. Most interestingly, this ad reminds us that *The Western Home Monthly* was not a women’s magazine but aspired to serve the household as a whole, allowing “the man of the house [to] keep abreast

of current thought through the Editorial pages, many special articles, *Philosopher*, *What the World is Saying*, etc.” (“Chat,” May 1920, 1). Referring back to Figure 4, we can see that topic 24 — the third most common — begins with “man” and ends with “car.” Car buying, in addition to bringing the magazine’s male readers back into focus, also anticipates the September 1929 ad’s fixation on progress (Figure 2). This male reader is not only well versed in current events but also knows how to manage his automobile — and, seemingly, does not require pictures to lure him into looking at an ad.

Combined, these ads speak to the banal violence of the white Canadian domesticity celebrated throughout the rest of the magazine, violence easily ignored because it is repeated page after page. Read against one another, the ads tell a story about an emerging national discourse premised on both ideologies of white domesticity and the increasing sophistication of print technologies. They speak to each other, weaving together concerns with domestic commodities, middle-class aspirations, and whiteness. Yet this reading is also deeply unnatural, putting together a series of images that would never have been read side-by-side like this, trying to pull politicized meanings from objects that likely would have been read through entirely different lenses. Thus, this tenuous reading prompts new questions rather than puts old questions to rest, including those of our capacity as critics to reconstruct the function and meaning of historical media.

## Conclusion

Although they are not identical, digitization is often associated with recovery work: excavating forgotten textual pasts from the archives and breathing new life into them by increasing their accessibility and, in a variety of ways, legibility. But the acts of both digitization and recovery are fraught with critical complexities. For one thing, digitization can in fact reproduce rather than challenge existing critical biases: “One of the risks with digitization in the increasingly online-oriented world is that if it is not there many assume it does not exist. Selection processes, canonical privileging of digital projects, and the minuscule percentage of material actually available in digital form suggests serious implications for online-based research methods and quantitative approaches relying on digital data” (DiCenzo 31). We cannot make sweeping claims about periodicals of the early twentieth century, for example, when only

a tiny percentage of those periodicals has been digitized and an even smaller percentage has the metadata necessary to make the texts useful for distant reading methods. Even the act of recovery, however, can serve to maintain the status quo, particularly when the work of recovery happens in lieu of developing new methods to work with the material being recovered (Fetterley 602). Recovery cannot take the place of theoretical interventions, but digital reading methods cannot be developed without recovery. So our digital methods are often developed to read those works that can be recovered via existing frames of reference.

A bid for the resources and storage necessary to create a high-quality digital record, like that of the digitized *Western Home Monthly*, often hinges on the possibility of articulating the importance of the material to be digitized. To state, as Collier does, “that the periodical is valuable simply because it exists — because it once performed some desirable functions for some number of people” (109) — is patently insufficient. For those of us trying to articulate the value of our archives, the question becomes not whether we will do so but on which discourses we will draw.

Our archives of print culture and modernity are already shaped by early literary historical biases that privileged “the little magazine, manuscripts, and first editions” over “reprint magazines and literary digests, reprint and circulating library hardback editions, pulp magazines, and paperbacks” (Earle 3). In this light, a household magazine such as *The Western Home Monthly* — feminized, middlebrow, rural, Canadian, technologically belated, and generically conservative — requires a passionate defence on multiple fronts, a politicized articulation of value that refuses the gendered, classed, cosmopolitan, and colonial biases that undermine it at every turn. Yet a project of recovery that would, in attributing value to *The Western Home Monthly* as a print public that mattered to a lot of people, also *redeem* it as an object of study would be politically and ethically bankrupt. How, then, to recover without redemption? To understand value without attributing worth? This article proposes banality as one possible way forward.

A double-edged critical sword, banality questions the discourses through which we dismiss generic, domestic, commercial, and/or popular forms of culture while acknowledging the insidious violence that often pervades seemingly unremarkable cultural production. We need to give the archives that we find boring a closer look, not only because

our boredom as critics is worth reconsidering, but also because boredom is frequently how oppression operates. Banality is also an ideal critical methodology for literary and cultural studies in the wake of the digital turn. As we gain methods to look at larger quantities of text, we can broaden our critical scope away from remarkable (and arguably far from typical) outcroppings of cultural production and toward what we might call cultural history's long tail. Magazines like *The Western Home Monthly* aren't always amenable to close readings, but as I hope this article demonstrates, they can respond in more interesting ways to different readings: surface, distant, historical, material. The irony is that a reading like this one would be impossible without the digitized archive, while the digitization of this archive was contingent on a justification of value that argues the opposite — that value means uniqueness, remarkableness, and even quality. As we further embrace digital reading methods, and the critical hermeneutics enabled by machine-assisted reading, hopefully we will also become better positioned to embrace the critical importance of banality, not as an excuse to ignore an archive, but as the motivation for taking a closer look.

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All information is drawn from the Winnipeg "Henderson's Directories," digitized by Peel's Prairie Provinces, a digital initiative of the University of Alberta Libraries.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas van Orden and I discuss the LDA algorithm, critiques of its use, and our own response to those critiques elsewhere (McGregor and van Orden 145).

<sup>3</sup> For more on the link between white women, innocence, colonialism, and the Canadian wilderness, see Henderson.



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