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Today's hi-fi magazines are certainly struggling, for several reasons that are obvious enough, but worth pointing out nonetheless. Let's be frank about one thing: hi-fi is no longer the fashionable item that it was during the 1970s and '80s.

Part of the reason has to do with the music, which is arguably less interesting than it was, say, between 1955 and 2000. One aspect of the problem might be to do with changes in recording technology. Another concerns the relatively recent popularity of MP3-coded downloads, which certainly have served to undermine the whole concept of hi-fi.

While the music, the recording technology and its delivery methods may all have played their roles, and might well demonstrate some lack of creativity, that's not the only reason why hi-fi as a whole, and the magazines in particular are suffering.

The emergence of the internet has had the most dramatic influence of all, impacting on the hi-fi scene in a number of different ways. Besides dramatically affecting the delivery of music, it has had huge impacts on hardware retail, and the readership of magazines. The latter have seen the replacement of relatively costly print by free-to-readers online publishing. This has not only diluted the expenditure on advertising, while the decline in the whole hi-fi sector has also significantly reduced revenues.

Faced with this 'double whammy', there's a strong danger that the British hi-fi magazines will take the line of least resistance, sacrificing a hard-won international reputation for honest criticism in order to maintain profitability.

I hear tell that some UK magazines now routinely send reviews to the brands concerned prior to publication, presumably giving the brand concerned the opportunity to incorporate any modifications, and mollify any criticisms.

One problem which currently faces hi-fi is that most of the latest equipment tends to be rather good, so serious criticism can often be difficult. But there's still no excuse for the degree of blatant sycophancy that seems an integral part of most paper magazine reviews today.

We certainly don't send out or doctor any of the *HIFICRITIC* reviews for 'correction' or modification. And I don't think any of my reviews for other magazines have been tampered with. But one incident that does stick in my mind was when I received payment from another magazine for a commissioned review that didn't actually appear.

Apparently the review in question had been sent to the brand's leading people, who had deemed it 'insufficiently enthusiastic', and expressed the preference that it shouldn't appear. (They were probably also major advertisers in the magazine.) At least no attempt was made to alter the copy in any way, and I received the promised payment, ostensibly from the editorial budget, so I didn't worry about it unduly.

Paul Messenger

Editor