



Briarpatch Annual General Meeting

Editor/Publisher Report

Saima Desai, Editor, and John Cameron, Publisher

September 29, 2022

Publisher

Publisher successes

- 1) **The magazine has retained much of its growth!** Though we've lost some subscribers relative to our 2020 peak, that's to be expected. We still have a much higher average number of subscription copies every issue, and growth in print subscriptions and single-copy sales tracks with other growth metrics for the magazine (see the editorial report).
- 2) **We ended the year with a budget surplus.** Not much of one, admittedly, but we've still managed to keep spending in line with expenses alongside fairly substantial growth.
- 3) **We successfully integrated digital fundraising into our operations.** We ran a digital fundraising campaign through our email list and successfully raised \$4766 for the Prison Abolition Issue. While we still need to create, e.g., best practices documents for running these fundraisers, we've learned it's a good way to raise funds, especially for projects.

Publisher challenges and recommendations

- 1) **One person effectively juggling too many revenue streams.** The publisher has historically been responsible for donor management, Sustainer management, advertising, grant writing, and fundraising, in addition to subscription management. We continue to try and grow circulation, but that leaves less time for those other aspects of the publisher's work. If we continue to grow the magazine - which we definitely should! - we'll want to address these other workloads.
 - a) **Grow the fundraising committee.** The existing board has set up a standing committee for fundraising.
- 2) **Lack of time for professional development.** The day-to-day and week-to-week tasks generally don't leave a lot of room for professional development work, especially given the above.
 - a) **Assess professional development priorities.** It's maybe a bit foolhardy to recommend this since it requires the publisher to set aside time to do this, but this work could possibly take place in conjunction with the Personnel Committee as part of a scheduled check-in/performance review. Having an idea of what and where to grow first would make setting aside time to pursue professional development more realistic.



- 3) **Costs of printing and mailing.** Both print and mail costs have gone up quite significantly over the past few years and it may not be possible to keep expenses in line with revenues as easily for much longer without working to take some action.
- a) **Research best practices for digital subscription retention.** A large proportion of our mailing costs are due to our print renewal program, which also happens to be the most successful type of renewal program and the subject of (fairly) recent work to refine for effectiveness with a consultant. Nevertheless, it might be a good idea to start looking into ways to automate and digitize the renewal process somewhat, especially if our subscription numbers keep growing.
 - b) **Look into single-copy and subscription pricing.** We last raised prices four years ago, raising cover prices by \$0.95. Unfortunately cover prices and subscription prices may soon stop covering the costs of single-copy and subscription issues. Staff is currently planning to consult with a Magazines Canada consultant in 2023 to strategize on this topic.

Finance

Complete financial statements for 2021-22 (April 1, 2021 to March 31, 2022) have been compiled by Iris Howden, and are available in a separate document. A few highlights are provided here:

	2021-22	2020-21
Revenue	\$237,987	\$264,000
Subscriptions	\$59,602	\$90,785
Advertising	\$23,820	\$26,170
Grants	\$40,032	\$33,128
Donations	\$78,780	\$99,541
Expenses	\$233,957	\$230,467
Salaries & benefits	\$96,901	\$94,924
Magazine production	\$97,639	\$99,479
Printing and Postage – Other	\$15,141	\$14,176
Rent	\$7,731	\$6,248



Net income (loss)	\$4,030	\$33,533
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While 2021-22 was still an excellent year for subscriptions and donations, exceeding our expectations in both categories, it was still less impactful than 2020-21. Grants represented a slightly higher portion of our annual revenues than usual due to an increase in our Aid to Publishers Grant brought on by increased subscription numbers in 2020-21 and a slight bump to our Canada Summer Jobs grant allowing us to cover that position for ten weeks.

In the expenses category, that Canada Summer Jobs position and its associated Mandatory Employment Remittance Costs for an extra couple of weeks account for the slight bump to salaries and benefits paid. While magazine production costs went down slightly, owing to a slight drop in subscription numbers, costs for printing and postage went up and will likely continue to rise in an inflationary economy. Rent costs also increased though they should stabilize for the 2022-23 fiscal year.

Circulation

Print subscription levels for 2021-22 were between 1943 and 2404.

Issue	May/Jun	Jul/Aug	Sep/Oct	Nov/Dec	Jan/Feb	Mar/Apr
Circulation	2377	2404	2104	2062	1952	1943

Revenue from sales of subscriptions

Year	Revenue (\$)
2016-17	30,577
2017-18	40,047
2018-19	32,491
2019-20	38,042
2020-21	90,785
2021-22	59,602

Advertising

Our numbers dropped again slightly, owing partly to a loss of revenue from SGEU's annual advertising campaign as of the January 2022 issue. We do have new advertising relationships



Briarpatch Incorporated Inc.

with the Regina Public Library & the Dunlop Gallery, a continuing relationship with the Mackenzie Art Gallery, and new advertising commitments from organizations like Between the Lines and Arbeiter Ring Publishing.

Staff

Briarpatch operates with a core full-time staff of two: editor Saima Desai and publisher John Cameron.

We once again contracted about 100 people to write articles, make art, contribute photos, fact-check, copy edit, and proofread. These contributors included the incarcerated and previously-incarcerated individuals who wrote and created art for our Prison Abolition Issue in September 2021.

In addition, we have a contract editor producing the *Sask Dispatch*, a free print publication distributed to all Saskatchewan Briarpatch subscribers and (pre-COVID) in select locations around Regina, and the RWDSU *Defender* newsletter, for an annual contract value of \$11,576.40. Sara Birrell had filled this position through 2021. As of January 2021, our current *Dispatch* and *Defender* editor is Emily Klatt. We're very grateful to Sara for their dedication to radical journalism and the way they've built the *Defender* and the *Dispatch* so far - thanks, Sara! We're also very excited for Emily to continue building momentum with both publications.

In the summer of 2021, we hired a summer student, Sophie Birks, for a ten-week period. This was financed by a \$3,901 grant from Service Canada's Canada Summer Jobs program. Sophie performed several editorial tasks, including proofreading and writing articles, and publishing tasks, including writing part of our digital appeal for the Prison Abolition Issue and working with organizations to send the Prison Abolition Issue into prisons. We re-hired Sophie for the same position through the same program in the current fiscal year (2022-23).

Fundraising

We continue to do two print appeals per year to subscribers (except sustainers). The appeals raised around \$3,000 each. We also ran an online fundraising campaign for the Prison Abolition Issue, which raised a whopping \$4766 to cover that issue's excess costs.

We once again ran a skate-a-thon as a COVID safety measure. While not as successful as the prior year's skate-a-thon, it still raised \$3828.60. There were separate skate-a-thons in Toronto and Edmonton as well, and we hope to continue to run concurrent in-person fundraisers in a similar fashion in the future.

An ongoing contract with RWDSU to produce the *Defender* newsletter continues to subsidize the production of the *Dispatch* by covering the costs of having Emily Klatt on contract.



Events

We are trying to focus on putting on events that: spark community organizing conversations that wouldn't otherwise happen, strengthen Briarpatch (visibility, subscription sales, donations, etc), and/or strengthen the political analysis around an issue.

We hosted an online event in collaboration with Labour for Defunding Police in May 2021 that brought in \$733.60 in donations, which covered \$300 in speakers' fees and left \$433.60 to be split equally between Briarpatch and Winnipeg Police Cause Harm.

In December 2021, we hosted a listening party for the Prison Abolition Issue featuring work read by the incarcerated contributors; because the event relied on incarcerated persons' labour, staff proposed to the Briarpatch board that the \$1,191.36 in donations from that event be distributed to the Toronto Prisoners' Rights Project Emergency Support Fund.

We also ran three free-to-attend digital solutions journalism workshops in partnership with Journalism for Human Rights. Two of these workshops, "What is Solutions Journalism?" and "Storytelling in Indigenous Communities," are archived on the Sask Dispatch Facebook page.

There was no annual holiday party at Huston House, once again due to COVID.

Grant Applications

As noted in our last report, our 2021-22 Aid to Publishers grant was \$29,434, with an additional 13% top-up arriving in August for a total of \$33,631.

In the last fiscal year, we also received a \$1,300 grant from RPIRG to support our annual Writing in the Margins contest, \$2,500 in funding from Journalism for Human Rights supporting solutions journalism writing in the Sask Dispatch, and \$7,000 in SSHRC funding to produce the Prison Abolition Issue.

ECMF - Edna Curran Memorial Fund

(The volunteer board that owns and manages Huston House; both staff are members)

John and Saima sit on the ECMF Board. The building is almost fully occupied, and the ECMF is in good financial standing. There is over \$70,000 available for repairs to the house, and the ECMF board is in the early stages of a (lengthy) renovation and retrofit process.

Our adjusted monthly rent is currently \$457.80. Briarpatch owed \$2,329 in back rent to ECMF and repaid that over 2021-22, and Briarpatch currently has no back rent owing.



Editor

Editorial changes

- Emily Klatt has become the editor of the *Sask Dispatch* and the *RWDSU Defender*, and is now handling most of the storyboarding and editing for that publication. We fundraised to allow Emily to work full-time in July and August, which allowed the *Dispatch* to publish more articles than usual.
- Sophie Birks is currently working as Briarpatch's publishing and editorial assistant at 10 hours/week. They are running *Briarpatch's* Instagram, the Writing in the Margins contest, and the Northern Writing Prize, and they are helping with editing articles for print and online. This has freed up some of Saima's time to focus on the 50th anniversary special issue.
- Thanks to a boost in subscribers and donations, we [increased Briarpatch's rates](#) for writing and art by \$50 across the board. This rate increase did not apply to the *Sask Dispatch*.
- We replaced long-form reviews with [reading lists](#). We continue to publish some long-form reviews online. Erin Baird became Briarpatch's volunteer reviews editor.
- Briarpatch published far fewer [online-only articles](#) this year. Instead, Saima focussed on creating special issues.

Editorial successes:

1. **We were nominated for two magazine awards:** Issue Grand Prix and One-of-a-Kind Storytelling at the National Magazine Awards! This is our second Issue Grand Prix nomination for a special issue in two years, meaning we are consistently creating special issues that are on the cutting edge of magazines in Canada.
2. **We published more investigative journalism.** This year we published [two articles](#) that investigated the C-IRG, the arm of the RCMP responsible for enforcing resource extraction companies' injunctions. This research [informed](#) articles about the C-IRG that were published months later by other outlets like APTN and the Narwhal, and [pressured](#) the C-IRG to respond to allegations of racism. (Though *Briarpatch's* contributions went mostly unacknowledged.) We also published a widely-read investigation into the [City of Toronto's encampment evictions](#). We also built relationships with [Research for the Front Lines](#), and hope to collaborate with them on investigations in the future.
3. **We made the magazine and website more accessible.** In the course of making the Disability Justice Issue, *Briarpatch* made changes to its magazine and website to make them more accessible to disabled readers. Temporary changes: we included plain-language summaries at the beginning of every article in the issue; we are fundraising to print copies of this issue in braille; we hope to record audio versions of all articles. Permanent changes: we increased the contrast of some text on *Briarpatch's* website to make articles easier to read; we now include alt-text for the photos and



illustrations that accompany articles; we built relationships with disability justice activists; we created best-practices for accessibility on web and social media.

4. **We sustained a strong team of fact-checkers.** In past years, training and retaining skilled fact-checkers has been difficult. This year, Briarpatch had a strong team of three fact-checkers that remained with the magazine throughout the year, upholding a high standard of rigor. Erin Baird also helped fact-check online-only articles.

Editorial challenges, and recommendations:

Last year, Saima raised concerns about 1) low pay for contributors, 2) a lack of capacity and infrastructure for publishing investigative journalism, 3) high turnover of fact-checkers, and 4) a lack of engagement with readers online. We improved on the first three, which is great news. However, the improvements have been small, and in some cases do not address the underlying issues.

1. **Paying contributors fairly.** Even with the raise in our rates, \$150-\$350 isn't remotely close to fair, considering how much work many writers and artists put into their contributions.
 - a. Briarpatch should increase its contributor fees.
2. **Publishing investigations.** Briarpatch readers have told us in reader surveys that they appreciate investigations, but Briarpatch doesn't have the budget to pay writers/researchers fairly for time-intensive investigations and to cover the associated costs (travel, FOI/ATI requests, database subscriptions, etc.).
 - a. Briarpatch should create a budget line for costs associated with investigations and communicate with writers that Briarpatch will cover these costs.
 - b. The editor should pursue professional development on investigative techniques and editing investigations
 - c. Briarpatch should develop a legal defence plan
3. **Fact-checking standards.** While Briarpatch fact-checks most articles, we do not fact-check as rigorously as possible, because of constraints on time and money.
 - a. The editor should hold more rigorous training for new fact-checkers.
 - b. The editor should develop clear guidelines that encourage more intensive fact-checking on potentially libellous articles.
 - c. Briarpatch's website should include a webpage that communicates our fact-checking standards to our readers.
 - d. Briarpatch should pay fact-checkers more money per article.
 - e. The editor should establish a better plan and budget for fact-checking online-only articles
4. **Engaging with readers online.** Our social media following and email newsletter subscribers have continued to grow. But without increased capacity for the editor to engage with online communities of readers, we're not using our online presence to fundraise, build community, or support grassroots media and struggles as effectively as we should be.
 - a. Briarpatch should work to hire a digital editor, and budget for better social media and email management tools



Contests

Writing in the Margins contest

2022 is the 12th iteration of Briarpatch's Writing in the Margins contest. The contest takes a massive amount of staff time to coordinate (an estimated 150 hours/year), and brings in negligible revenue.

Improvements: The 2021 WITM contest saw 88 entries, higher than the typical 60-70 entries we've seen in past years. We now accept submissions through a Google Form, making contest administration simpler. Board members have been involved in creating the shortlist for the contest, reducing staff workload. And Briarpatch has been able to hire an editorial assistant, Sophie Birks, who will largely manage the contest in 2022.

Briarpatch staff and board members were previously working to change the contest for 2022 to make it more sustainable and useful to Briarpatch's community; this could include funding/sponsorship, administrative support, and partnering with other creative writing or photography organizations. This work has stalled, but (barring minor improvements) the issues with the contest remain. This work should resume.

Andrea Walker Memorial Prize for Feminist Health Reporting

The funding for this prize ran out in 2022, making it the last year of the contest. We did not successfully raise funds to continue the prize beyond 2022.

Northern Writing Prize

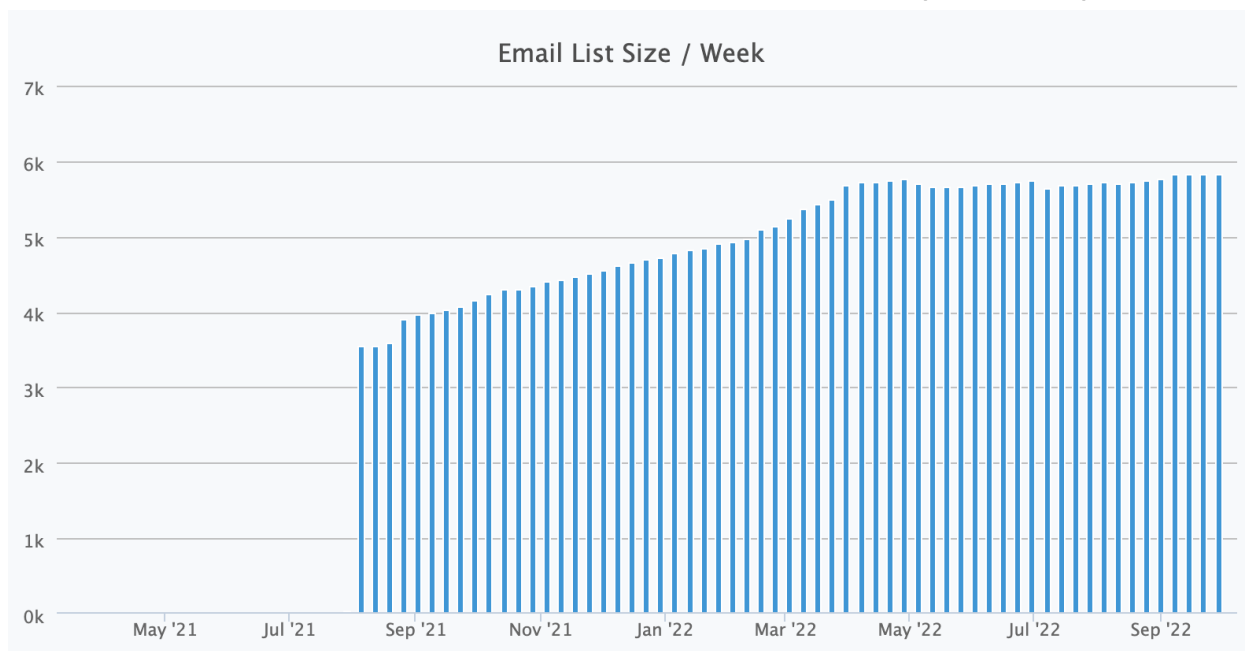
We continue to struggle to get the word out about the prize, and to receive a significant number of high-quality pitches. Even so, we published [an excellent prize-winning article](#) in 2022. Briarpatch should undertake more outreach in Northern communities, and consider partnering with Northern organizations like the [Dechinta Center](#).

Growth metrics

E-newsletter

We moved from Mailchimp to Action Network this year. Action Network is more affordable, is better for running email fundraisers, protects users' privacy better (though does not permit individual-level behaviour tracking), and is a nonprofit organization that supports progressive activism.

Our audience continues to grow steadily, despite (or because of?) the fact that we send few emails. From August 2021 to September 2022 our email list grew by 64%, from 3547 to 5812 subscribers. Our open rate is typically 30-40%, much higher than the industry average of ~18%.



Briarpatch website

Our web traffic spiked in 2020-2021 thanks to the Land Back issue, then returned to a relatively normal rate this year. Still, it indicates a lack of growth in people reading our articles online between 2020 and 2022. We need to use our social media and email list to drive more people to the website.

Pageviews

- 365,060 sessions in 2021-2022 ((July 1, 2021 - July 1 2022)
- 522,689 sessions in 2020-2021 (July 1, 2020 - July 1 2021)
- 367,131 sessions in 2019-20
- 295,881 sessions in 2018-19
- 269,673 sessions in 2017-18
- 275,407 sessions in 2016-17

Other insights:

- 39% of people browse the site on mobile, 59% on desktop, and 1.7% on tablet. Compared to last year, more people are browsing on desktop, potentially indicating that our mobile site is not working as well as necessary.
- The top cities where people browse from are not set (11%), Toronto (10%), Vancouver (3%), and Ottawa (3%). Regina users have declined from 3% to 1.5% in the last year.
- We have an 83% bounce rate and an average session duration of 1 minute
- Most readers find the site through organic search, despite the fact that we do not optimize our articles for SEO.



Social Media

Briarpatch social media

Facebook: 9,800 followers

Twitter: 12,700 followers

Instagram: 6,530 followers

Sask Dispatch social media

Facebook: 551 followers

Twitter: 1,401 followers

The Sask Dispatch

Updates:

- This year, we hired Emily Klatt as the *Dispatch's* editor, replacing former editor Sara Birrell
- We fundraised to employ Emily full-time in July and August 2022, allowing Emily to publish more articles
- We stopped publishing the twice-monthly *Sask Dispatch* email newsletter on Substack, due to a lack of capacity
- We launched a [dedicated website](#) for the *Sask Dispatch*

The *Dispatch* continues to grow slowly and haltingly. Limited money means we can only employ an editor part-time, which means the *Dispatch* publishes few articles and does little promotion or outreach. However, we now have the infrastructure of a dedicated website, which can support the growth of the *Dispatch*. We are exploring options to increase the *Dispatch's* growth, including an editorial collective, making the editor a permanent employee, and running consistent fundraisers.

The RWDSU Defender

In 2019 Briarpatch was contracted by the union that represents Briarpatch staff, SJB-RWDSU, to write and produce the RWDSU's newsletter, the *Defender*. Emily Klatt produces and lays out the *Defender*. RWDSU seems happy with the product, and renewed our contract this year.