

## Briarpatch Annual General Meeting

Editor/Publisher Report

September 19, 2023

# Publisher

## Publisher successes

- 1) We received a major grant through Heritage Canada for our 50th.** This grant provided funds for a long-overdue (nearly 15 years!) visual overhaul and website refresh. It also provided funds for a series of celebrations in Canadian cities - currently in progress - and an upcoming insert campaign in a few allied magazines. Many of these would not normally be as doable, or even doable at all, without this grant, and we can carry forward the lessons that we're learning from these grant activities to try and capture some of their positive impacts in future years with lower costs and capacity demands.
- 2) Strong increase in donations.** The Sustainer program saw some substantial and verifiable growth - an increase I'm hopeful will continue with our Sustainer recruitment in 2023 - and once again successful online fundraising helped to boost our one-time donation numbers. I'll have to dig in a little bit further in the actual Quickbooks data, but we have a strong donor base that we can hopefully continue to build and leverage, including many first-time donors.
- 3) General expenses are down (though magazine production costs are up).** We can't move our magazine production costs by very much without compromising editorial, but in addition to some reduced costs due to subscriber attrition (especially reducing our annual appeal costs) an internal inventory system has us saving money on printing and more liberal use of Canada Post's Personalized Mail system has us halving the costs of particularly large renewals. We'll see what happens if these numbers all stabilize a little year-over-year but in a budget where I'm often conscious that our expenses are trimmed to the bone, it's good to be able to say that we were a little more able to come in over on the stuff that really matters - quality editorial - by coming in a little under on some of the day-to-day.

## Publisher challenges and recommendations

- 1) A return to pre-pandemic subscription growth/numbers.** While we're still showing linear growth from 2019 on, the massive burst in growth we saw in 2020 has largely reverted to the kind of growth we were previously on track for, leading to a decrease in our year-over-year subscription revenues. There are a variety of possible reasons for this, internal and otherwise. Most publications have in the neighbourhood of 25% retention rates for first time subscribers. From the first-time subscriptions in 2020, this would hopefully leave our subscription rates around 1,900 or 2,000. We're still

unfortunately below that number, but marginally so. The ongoing challenge will be growing the publication in an environment where social media promotion is less of an option, as social media served not only as a vital avenue for the sharing of articles but as a reliable mechanism through which we could effectively advertise.

- a) Using knowledge from prior campaigns.** We still have an insert campaign to go in our Business Innovation Fund grant and the outcome of a prior direct mail campaign ready to go. It may be worth either setting aside funds or researching smaller grant opportunities to build regular promotional campaigns involving inserts or direct mail into an annual or biannual workflow.
      - b) Building better relationships with other outlets.** Working to cross-promote Briarpatch pieces to existing audiences outside of social media silos seems like a potentially effective way to promote the magazine going forward.
- 2) Lots of tasks, not a lot of capacity.** In addition to the regular work of Briarpatch, this year we took on a major grant, which has entailed a decent chunk of extra work (and will continue to be until the grant wraps) for both the editor and the publisher. As well, the barebones nature of staffing means that when one staffer is ill or takes a vacation, there's work that's not likely to be adequately covered. With much of staff energy devoted to the basic tasks of keeping the magazine going, it's hard to take on additional but necessary tasks, including those that drive magazine growth like collaborations, special issues, and circulation campaigns, or those that contribute much-needed external resources to the magazine like undertaking grants and strategic partnerships, without risking additional burnout.
  - a) Grow and engage the board.** At the very least, having a highly active and robustly-sized board can function to animate volunteers, contribute to planning, provide direction, and support staff.
- 3) Growing sustainable revenue streams.** While Briarpatch's revenue streams have remained largely static with minor upward growth in donations and subscriptions over the past five years, it's hard to grow those streams the way we need to in order to grow capacity - and it's hard to grow those streams *without* increased capacity, creating a kind of deadlock.
  - a) Build a strategic plan.** Determining how we want to grow the organization, what our goals are, and what we want to finance or pursue as projects in the long term will help staff more effectively target fundraising.

## Finance

Due to some factors outside our direct control there were issues in getting our finances worked through with our longtime bookkeeper, Arlene. We're still working with her and our reviewer, Iris, to get our finances completed and they should be in our hands in October, before the ISC filing deadline. We'll need to organize a special general meeting to approve final finances. The finances below are provisional and come from the documents going to Iris for the review:

	<b>2022-23</b>	<b>2021-22</b>
<b>Revenue</b>	\$268,768.43	\$237,987
Subscriptions	\$26,337.53	\$59,602
Advertising	\$24,805.67	\$23,820
Grants	\$66,409	\$40,032
Donations	\$115,427.50	\$78,780
<b>Expenses</b>	\$227,614	\$233,957
Salaries & benefits	\$89,638.24	\$96,901
Magazine production	\$108,486.34	\$97,639
Printing and Postage – Other	\$9,082.86	\$15,141
Rent	\$5,512.89	\$7,731
<b>Net income (loss)</b>	<b>\$41,154.33</b>	<b>\$4,030</b>

Grants are up due to an increase in our Aid to Publishers Grant courtesy of 2021-22 circulation as well as changes to the granting formula emphasizing Canadian content, plus a slight bump to our Canada Summer Jobs grant allowing us to cover that position for ten weeks.

Costs for printing and postage stabilized over 2022-2023, and smarter practice with both (better inventorying of print products) combined with some of the subscription attrition has worked to bring costs down.

In addition, please keep in mind that some of what's listed as our net income will be part of our 2023-24 FY spending in the Business Innovation Fund grant.

## Circulation

Print subscription levels for 2022-23 were between 2037 at their peak and 1774 at their lowest.

Issue	May/Jun	Jul/Aug	Sep/Oct	Nov/Dec	Jan/Feb	Mar/Apr
Circulation	2037	1978	1923	1876	1774	1825

### *Revenue from sales of subscriptions*

Year	Revenue (\$)
2017-18	40,047
2018-19	32,491
2019-20	38,042
2020-21	90,785
2021-22	59,602
2022-23	26,338

## Advertising

Our numbers are fairly consistent with last year's. Our advertising relationship with the Dunlop ran through the November 2023 issue, and organizations like the Mackenzie Art Gallery place ads on an ad-hoc basis. Work in 2022-23 to engage advertisers like Oxfam paid off in 2023-24 and will be reflected in that AGM report. Our agreement with Arbeiter Ring ran out in the May issue and we are working on them, along with several other recent and recurring advertisers, to continue their ad spend in 2024.

## Staff

Briarpatch operates with a core full-time staff of two: interim editor Sophie Jin and publisher John Cameron. Saima Desai is on a one-year leave from the editor position.

We once again contracted about 100 people to write articles, make art, contribute photos, fact-check, copy edit, and proofread. These contributors included the disabled writers and artists who contributed to our disability justice issue in September 2022.

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. Emily Klatt filled this position through 2022 and left in August 2023. As of September 2023, Tannara Yelland is the *Dispatch* and *Defender* editor. Tannara has a strong slate of articles lined up and we're very excited to see the momentum she's able to build with both publications.

## Fundraising

We continue to do two print appeals per year to subscribers (except sustainers). The appeals raised around \$3,000 each. Our online appeal last year ran in May as an effort to fund our *Sask Dispatch* editor for full-time work over the summer months and totaled \$3,900.

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 approximately \$3,500. There were separate skate-a-thons in Toronto and Edmonton as well. 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 the staffer 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.

Briarpatch ran a Workers' Party event at the Artesian during RDLC's MayWorks event with around 30 attendees, featuring music by the Alley Dawgs. RPIRG contributed \$200 to the event's expenses, and \$307.14 was donated at the door by attendees.

There was no annual holiday party at Huston House, once again due to COVID-19.

## Grant Applications

Our 2022-2023 Aid to Publishers grant was \$50,833, a substantial increase from the prior year's 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, and a \$41,568 grant from the Business Innovation Fund to support 50th anniversary activities.

## ECMF - Edna Curran Memorial Fund

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

John sits on the ECMF Board, and Saima was sitting on it prior to her leave. The building currently has one of its rental spaces vacant, 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 currently has no back rent owing.

## Editor

### Editorial changes

- Saima Desai took a one-year leave beginning December 31, 2022 and Sophie Jin took over as interim editor in January 2023.
- Emily Klatt was editor of the *Sask Dispatch* and the *RWDSU Defender*, and handled most of the storyboarding and editing for that publication. Emily's contract ended in August, and we hired Tannara Yelland as *Dispatch* and *RWDSU Defender* editor for September-December 2023.
- Briarpatch published far fewer [online-only articles](#) this year. Instead, Sophie focussed on getting a handle on the workload and publishing the [Black radicalism special issue](#).
- Mackenzie Hamon has left the *Briarpatch* fact-checking team after many years of fact-checking for the magazine. In September 2023, Olive Bestvater joined as a new fact-checker.

### Editorial successes:

1. **We published two special issues:** the [Disability Justice issue](#) and the [Independent Media issue](#).
2. **Saima was nominated** for a National Magazine Award for best editor!

### Editorial challenges, and recommendations:

Last year, Saima raised concerns about 1) low pay for contributors and 2) a lack of capacity and infrastructure for publishing investigative journalism. Sophie is reiterating these points this year, and adding a few more challenges:

1. **Circulation.** Meta and Google have blocked Briarpatch in response to the Online News Act. As a result, the magazine's announcements, calls for pitches, and articles are not getting as much attention.
  - a. Briarpatch should create a plan for outreach with organizers, writers, and artists to get around the news ban.
2. **Increasing editorial capacity.** Since Sophie took over, we've been publishing far fewer online-only articles. Sophie got COVID twice in the first three months of their contract, and it was very difficult to catch up.

- a. Briarpatch should hire another staff member so that staff can take vacations and use sick time.
3. **Pitches.** We've been receiving far fewer pitches than in previous years. The news ban means it'll be even harder for Briarpatch to circulate calls for pitches.
  - a. Briarpatch should create an editorial collective to help come up with article ideas and commission and solicit writers for articles.
4. **Paying contributors fairly.** \$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.
5. **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
6. **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

## Contests

### Writing in the Margins contest

2023 is the 13th 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.

The 2022 WITM contest saw 70 entries, which is consistent with submissions in previous 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.

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.

The contest is usually mostly promoted through social media, and fewer entries are expected this year since Briarpatch no longer has access to Meta platforms. Depending on the quantity of this year's submissions, Briarpatch board and staff should consider partnering with other magazines/arts organizations to promote the contest.

### **Northern Writing Prize**

Every year, we struggle to get the word out about the Northern Writing Prize, and to receive a significant number of high-quality pitches. Even so, we published [an excellent article](#) in 2023 by Rachel Cluderay. Briarpatch should undertake more outreach in Northern communities, and consider partnering with Northern organizations like the [Dechinta Center](#).

Sophie did not advertise the prize in 2023 due to worries about circulation because of the Online News ban. There is one more year left for the NWP, and in 2024, Briarpatch should make a plan for circulating the prize without social media.

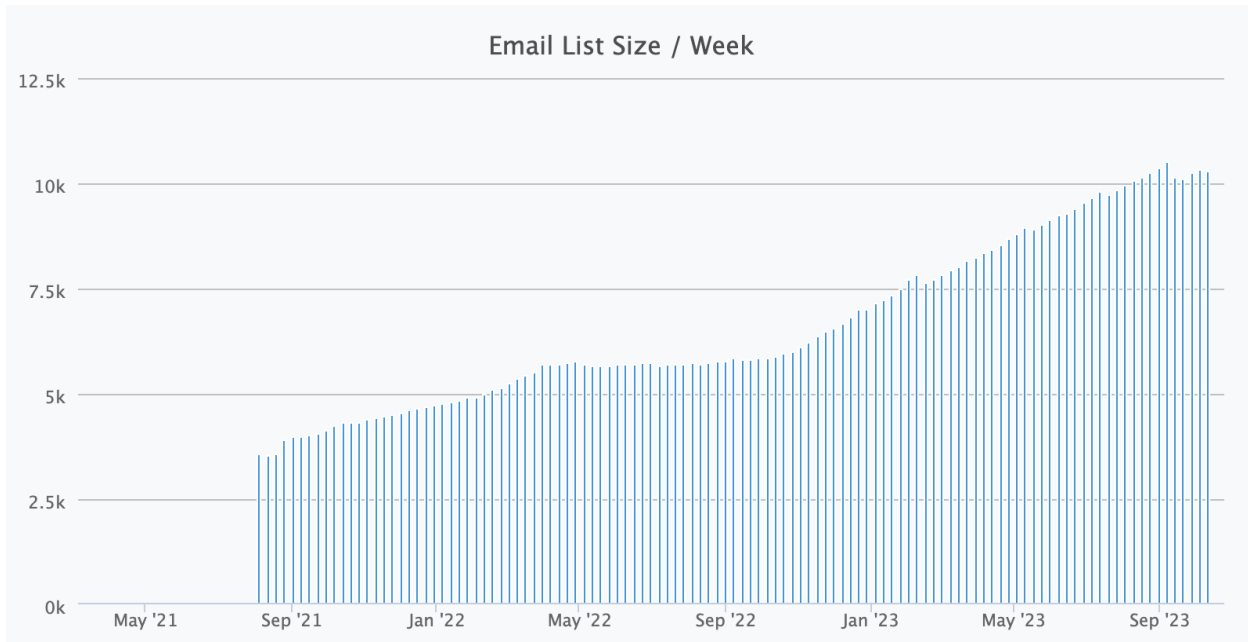
## **Growth metrics**

### **E-newsletter**

We moved from Mailchimp to Action Network in 2022. 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 2022 to October 2023 our email list grew from 5,714 to 10,261 subscribers. Our open rate is an average of 37%, much higher than the industry average of ~24%, and our click-rate of 3% is in line with industry standard click-through rates of 2.9%.





### 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 email list to drive more people to the website, and come up with other means of reaching new readers now that we don't have access to socials.

### Pageviews

- 212,480 sessions in 2022-2023 (July 1, 2022 - July 1, 2023)
- 365,060 sessions in 2021-2022 (July 1, 2021 - July 1 2022)
- 522,689 sessions in 2020-2021
- 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:

- 38% of people browse the site on mobile, 60.3% on desktop, and 1.7% on tablet. These numbers are all within 1% of last year's statistics, suggesting that our mobile experience and our means of reaching people on their phones may both need re-evaluation.
- The top cities where people browse from are not set (13.5%), Toronto (9.8%), Vancouver (3%), and Ottawa (3%). Regina users have declined from 1.5% to 1.3% in the last year.
- We have an 84% 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: 12,300 followers

Instagram: 7,188 followers

### Sask Dispatch social media

Facebook: 571 followers

Twitter: 1,400 followers

## The Sask Dispatch

### Updates:

- Emily Klatt continued as *Dispatch* and *Defender* editor through August 2023.
- Emily published a few online stories in addition to the print *Dispatch*.
- As of September 2023, Tannara Yelland is the *Dispatch* and *Defender* editor.

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. 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 produced and laid out the *Defender* until the July 2023 issue, and Tannara produced the October 2023 issue. RWDSU seems happy with the product, and renewed our contract this year.