

Przemysław Pawelec

"Black Belt" as an example of a magazine about martial arts : outline of the subject

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CULTURAL RESEARCH

PRZEMYSŁAW PAWELEC

Idokan Poland Association, Rzeszów (Poland)

pa_przemek@poczta.onet.pl

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Abstract

This article outlines briefly the subject matter of the American „Black Belt” Magazine which is addressed to fans of martial arts. This periodical is a special interest magazine designed for a specific segment of the market.

The article is a simple description and contains three parts: characteristics of special interest media designed for individuals interested in martial arts; the history and circumstances in which “Black Belt” was launched; and the classification of the magazine’s subject matter based on four major subject components: theoretical issues, practical issues, creating heroes and idols, and advertizing. The author used the paper version of the magazine as well as its electronic version available online.

Introduction

It is assumed that martial arts and combat sports have always fascinated people raised in western cultures. They were interested in both the physical fitness of masters and the profound spirituality characteristic for people who were particularly skilful in martial arts. These elements may have resulted in the gradually increasing number of individuals taking up various systems of combat. The phenomenon was further promoted by mass media which turned commercial performances into media shows. As a consequence martial arts were transformed into sports disciplines in which the most important elements were competitiveness and accomplishments of specific contestants. Such aspects as the eastern spirituality and philosophy lost their central meaning [Lickiewicz 2006]. At the same time “(...) many students departed from the traditional teachings in search of something different. The well-proven oriental methods of training were verified by the logical western mind in order to give new shape to fighting disciplines, in particular to learning. According to some opinions, Japanese and Chinese influences in the western practices are dying out” [Lewis 1998].

Mass media took advantage of the fashion for martial arts. Initially those mainly included printed media and television, and later were jointed also by the Internet (radio as a technology which does not operate with images did not play a significant part in the process of promoting martial arts within mass populations). The whole process started in the USA, where the public’s demand for media-created products is greater than in other countries of the world [Adamowski 2008].

One of the examples of seizing the opportunity created by this favourable situation can be “Black Belt” Magazine. Its characteristics will serve as the ground for the presentation (by means of description) of the contents and structure of printed media devoted to martial arts. It should be emphasized that the author of this article used the paper as well as the electronic version of the magazine, and the concepts of “martial arts” and “martial systems” will be used interchangeably.

Martial arts oriented public and mass media

“Black Belt” (further BB) as a magazine functions within a specific mass media market and

participates in its segmentation (by being part of the segment of sports publications). This process allows for adjusting the structure of the magazine to the preferences of its readers, which further contributes to the growth of its competitiveness. Yet, segmentation is not only significant as a means to meet readers' expectations but also for intellectual development [Patrzałek 2002].

This means that the public purchasing another issue of BB in addition to enjoying its entertaining quality may also treat it as a source of knowledge coming from specialists (e.g. masters of specific styles of combat, psychologists, historians of sports). Thanks to this, individuals practising the arts expand their knowledge and gain more awareness in facing problems (e.g. the recurring stressful situation) as they arise, even though in the past those might have been difficult to solve. That also allows them to be more selective and to identify the relevant information.

Thus, readers become the “audience” (i.e. recipients in the simple model of communication: source → channel → message → audience → effect), which may be analyzed (in this case by the publisher and editors of BB) as: 1) potential (the whole public interested in martial arts having at least rudimentary knowledge of the subject); 2) actual (students of martial arts who have read BB but may have not purchased the magazine, e.g. some individuals practising at the dojo or using a library reading room); 3) paying public (buyers exclusively, that is the most important public for the publisher for economic reasons); and 4) cumulative (the total of the public receiving the message created by the editorial staff of BB, including individuals more or less interested in the subject matter) [Goban-Klas 2006].

The knowledge of the audience's preferences is significant for the efficient operation and economic calculation in case of each media entity, for instance due to the possibility of changes in those preferences. Other equally important factors include the awareness of the impact exerted by a given media entity on specific individuals (in this case – learners of martial arts – P. P.) [*Ibidem*] as well as the ongoing enhancement of the means used by the editorial staff in the process of mass communication.

While analyzing the messages created by authors contributing to BB one can apply the classification specified by Bernard Berelson (despite the critical opinions voiced by numerous researchers) [Pisarek 1983]. In order to exemplify the application of this classification with regard to printed media focusing on martial arts, this author has used short descriptions outlining the essence of the problem.

The first analysis is related to the characteristic features of the contents. B. Berelson included here such factors as the occurring tendencies for changes in the contents, exploring differences in the contents of similar messages in other countries and monitoring those with respect to the goals of their originator. Such an analysis can be applied particularly while discussing the contents of BB in specific periods of time, and relative to the changes in the personnel of the publisher and the editorial staff, etc. Similarly, this analysis may be used for making a comparison between BB and other magazines focusing on the same subject matter (also in other countries).

The second type of analysis, according to B. Berelson's classification, is aimed at the characteristic features of the message form (e.g. investigating the features of the style which are typical for a given medium). In this case we can explore the language describing the subject of martial arts in the aforementioned magazine, e.g. facts from the lives of well-known individuals starring in film productions, descriptions of new products (“are these currently considered to be trendy or outdated?”) as well as behaviours of competitors during tournaments.

The third type of analysis relates to the characteristics of message originators (e.g. their intentions). This is particularly significant during the analysis of magazines about martial arts, and deal with the way they present specific issues which may generate opposing responses in readers (e.g. the problems of doping, verification of masters' and students' ranks, effectiveness assessment of a given martial system) while the originator of the communication – or the whole editorial staff contributing to publicizing it – takes one of the sides in a possible dispute, thus giving up the objectivism of journalism.

The fourth type of characteristics allows for investigating the recipients of the communications (e.g. identifying who they are, and their characteristic features). If the editorial staff is familiar with the level of sales of consecutive issues of the magazine, it will also be important to know the results of surveys related to gender, age, education and income level of recipients as well as topics demanded by them, which may be helpful in more precise identification of data related to the preferences of the public constituting this market segment. This information is particularly important for the editorial staff while taking decisions on creating the most adequate, or modifying the existing contents of subsequent issues of the magazine.

The final, fifth type of characteristics proposed by B. Berelson relates to the effects triggered by a given publication among readers. Raising some

problems may instigate disputes in circles of martial arts enthusiasts, including international debates (e.g. the issue of the media presence of sports events such as Konfrontacje Sztuk Walki (Martial Arts Confrontations – KSW) or Ultimate Fighting Championship (- UFC) or may be aimed at presenting various arguments. As a result that may bring about changes in the laws (e.g. a lack of consent from authorities for the organization of tournaments).

The Internet is also used for publishing materials related to martial arts. Unlike the traditional mass media, websites do not generate high maintenance costs for their creators. Therefore they can be launched not only by professionals but also by amateurs, not only by masters but also by students, not only by enthusiasts of a given style but also by its opponents.

Attractiveness of Internet websites addressed to enthusiasts of martial arts may depend on several factors, such as: 1) accessibility of the site (e.g. the speed of its loading), 2) frequency of its updates, 3) available language versions (the minimum requirement is an English language version), 4) diversity of publications on offer (films, articles, photos, graphics, etc), 5) the largest possible number of links to other websites (particularly for individuals who are more extensively interested in the subject), 6) the visual layout of the site (e.g. colours, graphic layout), and 7) other factors. The fulfilment of the above conditions may contribute to the full use of the website for promotion of any of the martial sports or other values (e.g. the culture of the Far East).

For the needs of this brief study "martial arts sites" are defined as those which are positioned by any web search engine by means of key words connected with: 1) the phrase "martial arts", 2) a specific martial style or sport (e.g. "kung fu", "karate", "systema"), 3) masters of martial arts (e.g. Masutatsu Oyama, Morihei Ueshiba), 4) events related to martial arts (e.g. KSW, UFC games), 5) accessories used for practising martial arts (e.g. weapons, protective gear) and 6) widely understood culture, both traditional (e.g. dojo etiquette, the meaning of symbols of martial arts), and contemporary (e.g. comic books on martial arts).

Electronic versions of printed magazines (e.g. BB) tend to contain some columns consistently, among those we can distinguish: 1) Photo gallery (presenting images from competitions, trainings, seminars, selected fighting techniques, etc), 2) Links (to the websites of related federations, or clubs), 3) "About us" (characteristics of the fighting style, presentation of a given school, its masters, hierarchy, etc.), 4) Timetables and locations of trainings, 5)

Multimedia (films which sometimes supplement the photo gallery). Some websites contain for instance exam requirements set for candidates for higher levels, essential information on the etiquette, behaviour during trainings, etc. and provide the Internet users with an opportunity to participate in discussion forums. In the aforementioned inventory we can also encounter online shops which offer tools, clothes, accessories, etc. regardless of the products on offer from the sections themselves.

The beginnings of "Black Belt"

It can be assumed that individuals taking up martial arts in the 1960s (or earlier) needed some printed media designed exclusively for them. It is possible they were looking for magazines in which information about people and events related to martial arts were not merely an addition to other sports disciplines.

"Black Belt" Magazine is one of the oldest periodicals devoted to martial arts. It was launched in 1961 in Los Angeles by two brothers, James and Mitochi (practitioner of aikido) Uyehara and Louis Kimcey. The initial capital for the three associates was 500 dollars. The first issue (photo. 1) consisting of 68 pages, was mainly devoted to judo, but it also contained some articles on other martial arts [Miłkowski 2008]. In the first issue the editors emphasized the significance of the choice they had made with regard to the title of the magazine as a reference to the symbol standing for the mastery of a practitioner of martial arts: "We choose this name for our magazine for two reasons. First, only in the Oriental self-defense arts and sports is the "Black Belt" worn as part of the uniform. And then it is worn only by an individual who has achieved the rank of sho-dan, or "first degree". Second, it has a deep significance for all enthusiasts of Judo, Aikido, Karate, and Kendo. This is because the "Black Belt" denotes the expert. The wearer of the "Black Belt" is recognized as a qualified instructor. Until one wears the "Black Belt" he is not satisfied with his accomplishment. Our reasons for deciding to publish this magazine are many" [Uyehara, Uyehara 1961].

From 1964 "Black Belt" was published regularly, every two months, and a year later it became a monthly magazine. Ten years later James Uyehara left the partnership and his brother founded Ohara Publications [Miłkowski 2008].

For many years the magazine was in a difficult financial situation. The most likely reason for that was the fact that although the very idea for starting this type of publication was appreciated by practitioners



Photo 1. Cover of the first issue of “Black Belt”

Source: „Black Belt” (1961), vol. 1, no. 1, p. 1, http://www.blackbeltmag.com/content/BB_first_issue.pdf (20.03.2011).

of martial arts and other people interested in the subject, yet its contents may have failed to meet their expectations. The evidence justifying such explanation may be fact that the financial position of BB was improved after a series of cheap books on martial arts was published (according to the editors the books sold in satisfactory numbers of copies), and after Bruce Lee made his appearance. The first issue with his image was sold in a number of copies that was several times larger than the previous issues. In later period the magazine also featured some masters who started their film careers, e.g. Cynthia Rothrock, Chuck Norris, Steven Seagal, Jackie Chan, Don Wilson, Jean-Claude van Damne [*Ibidem*].

Specialists in martial arts who were interviewed by the editorial staff for the first issue of BB included: Tokuji Hirata (4th dan in Judo, 3rd dan in Aikido), Torao Mori (8th dan in Kendo), Edmund Parker (3rd dan in Kempo Karate), Hal E. Sharp (4th dan in Judo), Isao Takahashi (5th dan in Kendo, 4th dan in Aikido) and Ben Tsuji (6th dan in Judo, 2nd dan in Aikido). Other individuals were introduced in subsequent issues of the magazine.

The first issue of “Black Belt” included publications connected with the biography of Jigoro Kano – the founder of Kodokan Judo. The author (or authors) of one of the articles showed appreciation for his contribution into the development of martial arts: “His successes, especially in the field of education, resulted from his applying his training received in Judo. It was through his personal efforts and prestige that Judo became an official school sport in Japan” [NNc, 1961]. Additionally, interesting facts contained in the issue included the presentation of Lucille Hagio, an instructor teaching Judo to females at the University of California [NNb, 1961].

Other topics in the first issue of “Black Belt” included: an account from a Kendo demonstration made in Los Angeles by Master Torao Mori [NNd]; profiles of Ed Parker [Slove], a Kempo Karate Master, and Koichi Tohei, an Aikido Master [NNa], an account from the USA Judo championships [NNe]. The issue also contained: a presentation of Aikido techniques, information about one of the Jujitsu schools operating in the United States, entertainment columns (in the form of cartoons), as well as advertisements (e.g. related to a ship voyage to Japan, exhibition of firearms, and clothes for men).

Classification of topics and forms of communication used in “Black Belt”

In the early 2011 “Black Belt” was introduced by its publisher (Active Interest Media Publication) as a magazine which provides its readers not only with a wide range of information related to theoretical issues but also illustrations for performing practical exercises. According to the publisher BB is: “the world’s leading self-defense magazine and is dedicated to both the classical and the modern eclectic martial arts (...) “Black Belt” features interviews with the world’s most prestigious martial artists and historical pieces on the philosophies of various combat styles, as well as in-depth coverage of the latest techniques, weapons, self-defense systems, training regimens and industry trends” [NNg, 2011].

For the needs of this brief study it was assumed that the subject matter of consecutive issues of BB (presented by means of all available genres of journalism as well as photography) may be divided into four major topic categories. The category “Other” (containing publications which cannot be qualified for any of the four groups) was omitted in the discussion due to the exceedingly large size of the material which would be impossible to analyze within the intended volume of this article. The

author focused exclusively on the aforementioned contents. The discussion of this problem was supplemented with quotations from relevant articles (selected at random). To some extent the discussion uses the form of a case study based on its descriptive method and focusing on a specific phenomenon, which provides a starting point for further investigation of the subject [Dominick, Wimmer 2008]. As mentioned in the introduction, the author had access to the source materials in both the traditional and electronic form (full versions).

The first theme section appearing in nearly every issue of BB contains all publications dealing with the philosophy of martial arts, the tactics assumed in the conducted duels and the psychology of individuals e.g. participating in full-contact fighting. The discussed issues also include theoretical assumptions of specific styles and the differences with regard to other martial systems. At times the authors pose questions related to specific martial arts and further provide answers to those: "What is jeet kune do? It has become one of the most well-worn questions in the martial arts. In the decades since Bruce Lee's death, an endless series of books, magazine articles and Web pages has taken up the question, but no one seems to be able to agree on the answer. This column is about why we can't agree on what jeet kune do is" [Vargo 2002].

The second theme section of BB is connected with the practical side of martial arts. Fighting techniques characteristic for specific systems, a comparison of those with the techniques applied by practitioners of other martial arts, the use of weapons and other objects in fighting and demonstration of particular exercises aimed for enhancing practitioners' level of skills were all qualified to the second section. One of the publications have demonstrated selected judo techniques by means of numbered illustrations depicting specific movements: "Author Alain Burrese face his opponent. The opponent punches, and Burrese steps off-line at a 45-degree angle and blocks. He moves behind the attacker and wraps his arm around his neck. Once the sleeper hold is completed, Burrese can step back and take the attacker to the floor. On the ground, Burrese tucks his head to protect his eyes from being gouged" [Burrese 1998].

The third theme group in BB distinguished by the author of this article is related to the promotion of people connected with martial arts. These individuals appear in movies on martial arts, produced mainly in the USA and China, where they are considered to be symbols of pop culture by enthusiasts of those kinds of productions, and may be recognized even by people who are not familiar

with martial arts [Cynarski 2000; Mosz 2004; Zygmunt 2006]. In BB those masters are featured in three ways: as promoting themselves (and their signature products), as promoting products which they do not advertise officially (below - more about that), and as instructors emphasizing their role among the members of this group. This is the case with regard to e.g. the actor, Chuck Norris who made this statement while promoting one of the adopted fighting styles: "Look at chun kuk do. We've incorporated Brazilian jujutsu into it because the grappling techniques work so well. In fact, my "Black Belt"s have to become proficient in jujutsu. And I'm a "Black Belt" in judo, so I have incorporated judo concepts, too" [Fogan 2002].

The fourth theme group in BB contains various types of advertising (texts, illustrations, and the two means combined). They relate to various segments of economy: insurances, sports events, accessories necessary for practising martial arts (e.g. weapons, sports hall equipment), clothing as well as TV programmes and Web sites. In last two mass media, images of well-known masters are used; their endorsement serves as a guarantee of the high level of competitions, which means the broadcasts are going to be particularly interesting to watch. As a form of self-promotion, this also benefits the masters themselves and allows for their schools to gain more recognition and popularity.

The ads for upcoming events in BB (e.g. jubilee games, seminars with Great Masters participating, tournaments), as well as advertisements of schools, training materials (e.g. quick self-defence courses on DVDs) are accompanied by emotionally loaded slogans emphasizing the high quality of the products on offer: „In this dynamic New Panther video training series, Ultimate Ultimate Champion Don "The Predator" Frye personally teaches you his devastating "The Predator" stand-up and ground fighting no-holds-barred streetfighting self-defense system (...) Don't waste your time or money on outdated Bvideos presented by interior unproven fighters (...) Frye will teach you the most devastating moves and techniques from conditioning to finishing holds & escaping" [NNf, 1997].

The publishers and editorial staff of "Black Belt" have adjusted their offer to the Internet users. The paper version of "Black Belt" has a corresponding electronic version, which in the address and the main banner (photo 2.) holds the full name of the magazine (www.blackbeltmag.com). This website features the following theme sections (as of March 20, 2011): Styles (with a list of presented martial arts), Videos (films with accounts from competitions, presentations of fighting techniques, etc.), Archives (e.g. archived news, gallery of

BLACK BELT®

World's Leading Magazine of Martial Arts

Photo 2. The headlining banner on the “Black Belt” website
Source: <http://www.blackbeltmag.com> (20.03.2011).

celebrities, guide to masters of martial arts who are also writers in BB, martial arts on TV and in other media), Interactive (materials submitted by Internet users), Marketplace (ads of goods and services on offer), Dojo Directory (a dojo directory for the USA, Canada and other countries of the world), Most Popular (list of articles which are most often read by Internet users) and E-Newsletter.

To sum up this outline of the themes contained in BB one may say that the contents of this magazine are varied and provide an in-depth response to the expectations of the public using this medium. Keeping in mind the diversity of its readership in terms of the practised styles, the editorial staff does not focus on presenting a few selected combat styles, but offers a great variety of those. Obviously the greatest number of publications is devoted to the most popular types of martial arts (karate, kung fu, taekwondo), but those who are interested may also learn here about more “exotic” martial systems (e.g. sambo, bando) and expand their knowledge (also online) with regard to theoretical issues.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the contents presented by contemporary printed media addressed to enthusiasts of various martial art schools it is possible to draw a conclusion that mass media favour multidimensional approach to martial arts. Individuals taking advantage of the mass media may see martial arts as a way of life, a trend in the fashions of physical culture, a type of sport competitiveness, entertainment, leisure, and most of all as business and show [Raczkowski 2008]. Therefore, some people may hold an opinion that in the 21st century martial arts cannot exist without mass media.

The fact that media create martial arts masters for the needs of mass culture is not always highly regarded by other experts in this field. Thus there is a discrepancy in the way film stars acting in movies of this type are seen by their fans and the actual level of their knowledge and skills: “(...) Another obstacle in realistic perception of combat with no weapons is the cinema itself. In fact fighting with one’s bare hands is anything but what you can see in the movies

(...) Chuck Norris, Jackie Chan and other heroes of the silver screen may be great stars of martial arts but it is still true they would not stand their ground against real opponents” [Shillingford 2004].

One may therefore risk a claim that BB, as a magazine designed specifically for the segment of the public that is passionate about martial arts – besides presenting the history, philosophy, psychology and other related theoretical issues – is mainly a medium cooperating with the American show business, which includes not only Hollywood movies but also the promotion of martial arts tournaments. This approach is in conflict with the customs, world view and moral code of martial arts which still are observed in non-commercialized schools and groups [Szymankiewicz, Śniegowski 1987].

In order to expand the understanding of the presented issue the author suggests that a more comprehensive analysis of the contents of “Black Belt” should be performed. Its results could bring an answer to such questions as: what image of a modern-day martial arts master is created by contemporary mass media and in what way is he perceived by people who are not part of the in-group. It would also be interesting to make a comparison, and find differences between Polish and American public, and Polish and American mass media designed for enthusiasts of martial arts.

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„Black Belt” jako przykład czasopisma o sztukach walki. Wprowadzenie do zagadnienia

Słowa kluczowe: media, segmentacja, komunikacja, sztuki walki

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia w zarysie opis prasy skierowanej do osób uprawiających sztuki walki i tematykę amerykańskiego czasopisma „Black Belt”, wybranego jako przykład ilustrujący to zagadnienie. Czasopismo to jest tytułem prasowym segmentowanym, skierowanym do określonej grupy odbiorców. Może być traktowany zarówno jako źródło rozrywki, ale także wiedzy pochodzącej od specjalistów (np. mistrzów poszczególnych stylów walki, psychologów). Do opisanego tego czasopisma wykorzystano (pomimo opinii krytycznych głoszonych przez wielu badaczy) również klasyfikację analizy stworzoną przez Bernarda Berelsona. Z kolei do przedstawiania historii pisma posłużono się także pierwszym numerem „Black Belt”.

Przedmiotem opisu były wybrane publikacje ukazujące się w „Black Belt” od pierwszego numeru zaprezentowanego czytelnikom w 1961 roku do numeru marcowego z 2011 roku. Publikacje te wybrano losowo ze względu na ich tematykę. Wykorzystano przy tym wersję papierową i dostępną w Internecie wersję elektroniczną magazynu.

Uzyskane wyniki ujęto w czterech głównych częściach tematycznych: 1) publikacji traktujących o filozofii sztuk walk, założeniach taktycznych przeprowadzanego pojedynku i psychologii osób biorących udział np. w walce pełnokontaktowej, 2) praktycznej stronie sztuk walki, 3) promocję osób związanych ze sztukami walki oraz 4) różnego rodzaju reklamy. Pominięto przy tym omawianie kategorii „Inne” (zawierających publikacje nie znajdujące się w żadnej z części) ze względu na zbyt dużą ilość materiału, którego omawianie przekroczyłoby ramy objętościowe.

Artykuł zakończono krótkimi wnioskami podsumowującymi zarówno tematykę czasopisma, jak i udział takiego medium w kreowaniu gustów odbiorców.