Making the Digital Leap Forward

Identifying Digital Content Delivery Systems That Effectively Support Magazine Publishing

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for



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January 18, 2018

This work was supported by:



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Introduction

In a publishing world that has become increasingly digital, many magazine publishers are looking for ways to take the great digital leap forward. New marketing strategies must be adopted and different modes of distribution considered, including partnering with digital content delivery systems.

Although the question of how and whether to go digital is unique to each publication's needs and capabilities, this platform comparison guide seeks to help publishers by discussing and analyzing five of the most used systems available: Issuu, Zinio, Magzter, Mag+, and 3D Issue.

Below, publishers will find overviews, special features lists, and in-depth user experience reviews. Additionally, the end of this document provides tables comparing these five sites' special features, costs/plans, and user experience. This comparison was enhanced by Alyssa Schwartz's research on the same subject for Magazines Canada in 2014.

Process

The goal of this guide is to help publishers decide if they are ready to take their publication online and which service might be best for their needs. To do this, researchers approached the process of compiling information from two standpoints—that of a publisher, and that of a reader.

Researchers for the Magazine Association of BC personally researched and test-drove these services using a laptop, smart phone, and tablet, while keeping an eye on their intuitiveness, navigability, features, and customization.

From a publisher's standpoint, researchers paid attention to costs and potential revenue, ease of uploading issues, and powerful functionality (e.g. interactivity, multimedia, ad tracking). Researchers also documented plans and costs for Issuu, Zinio, Mag+, and 3D Issue, but this information was not publically available for Magzter, who prefers to discuss this with publishers upon request.

When questions arose, researchers asked the companies directly to provide clarification. All companies were timely in responding except Issuu, who replied after 32 days.

Surprisingly, although this research was begun in 2015, these five companies have stayed fairly static in their offerings. However, three out of the five (Issue, Zinio, Magzter) cut back on special features and strengthened their core offerings. With that in mind, publishers would do well to make sure all services currently being offered are actually of value to their magazine, and that the platform they decide to go with is committed to retaining those services. The following comparison guide will help you to evaluate some of the most popular platforms and provide a framework for evaluating other providers.

Digital Content Delivery Systems



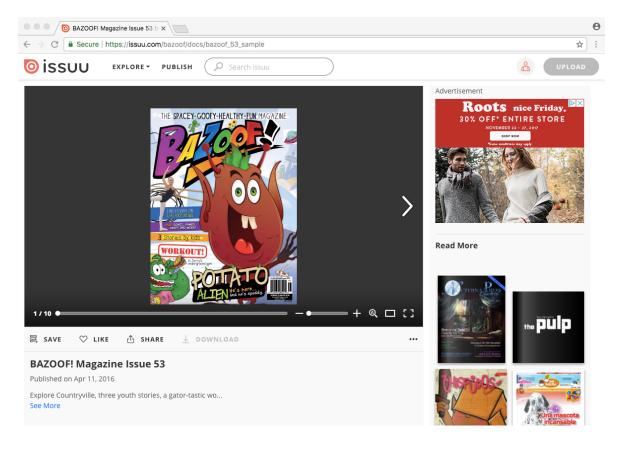
Overview

Issuu currently has more than 30 million publications related to food, travel, sports, technology and a wide range of other topics available to more than 100 million visitors per month. Self-described as "an archive, library and newsstand all in one reading experience", Issuu allows publishers to upload and distribute their magazines across a variety of platforms with native iOS, Android and Windows applications in the form of a digital flipbook.

Special Features

Standalone and Branded Readers

Three reader platforms - default, standalone and branded - are available. While each reader has fullscreen, zoom, search and navigation capabilities, standalone and branded publications can be downloaded for offline reading and do not need to include links to related publications. Premium subscribers can further customize the platform by adding their logo to Issuu's branded reader.



Issuu Clip

Issuu Clip allows readers to share parts of a publication – it's the digital equivalent of clipping articles and images from a printed magazine. Clipped content can be shared on Issuu or via social media. Publishers can also use this feature to enhance their publication with links to advertisers and related content.

Paid Subscriptions

Although Issuu does not have a direct method of charging readers for content, there are two methods that allow publishers to do so. The first method involves uploading a partial issue. The partial publication needs to include pages with "subscribe" or "buy now" links that will direct readers to a magazine's website, where they can purchase the complete version of the digital publication.

The second method involves posting unlisted (private) publications that can only be accessed with a direct URL, which can then be distributed to already-paying subscribers.

User Experience

Reader Perspective

Issuu is an easy-to-use platform that allows users to read, share and follow a variety of publications. It is an especially useful platform for those interested in reading regional or niche publications that are not readily available otherwise.

Once readers have created a free account, they have access to an "Explore" tab where they can browse through a collection of featured issues. On mobile, this collection is divided into "Staff Picks", "Featured Stacks and Publishers", and "Currently Being Read" lists.

The mobile application also allows users to search for publications according to interests. The "Explore" tab on desktop platforms is limited to a basic keyword search.

When readers find publications they enjoy, they can choose to follow publishers. These titles will then be displayed on the user's "Feed" tab.

Overall, the "Explore" and "Feed" tabs present an enjoyable user experience, especially if readers are interested in finding new titles.

The actual reader platform, however, is lacklustre. While the navigation, social sharing and full screen function work well, they are negated by the platform's zoom feature. Issuu publications are not responsive, and therefore do not adjust to different screen sizes. As a result, readers must zoom into the area of the publication they would like to read, then click and drag their way through an article, regardless of what device they are using. The Issuu reader appears to function best on tablets as they most closely mimic the actual size of printed magazines.

Aside from hyperlinks, the ability to share via social media (Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Google+, LinkedIn and Pinterest) appears to be the only additional feature within an Issuu publication. Issuu Clip

further enhances social sharing and can potentially increase conversation amongst readers; it's interesting to flip through a publication while simultaneously seeing what others have liked, shared and commented on.

While Premium and Optimum members have access to "priority support", other members can be subjected to long wait times. Additionally, while the "Explore" tab may increase exposure, readers looking for additional content (audio/video, exclusive articles, etc.) may be disappointed as Issuu publications are intended to mimic print variations in almost every way.

ZINIO

Overview

Zinio delivers more than 5,500+ titles (500 million magazine issues) to readers around the world and is available on desktops, laptops, tablets and smartphones with iOS, Android and Windows 8 applications. The Zinio platform includes production services (layout and design), reader software and a digital delivery system that allows users to purchase subscriptions and back issues of a publication. Zinio's website states that while there are no upfront costs, they operate on a revenue sharing model. This means that for however many magazines are sold, Zinio will take a percentage of the sales. According to Stephanie Johnson, a Zinio sales representative, that percentage changes depending on the publisher's current number of subscribers, frequency of publication, whether it is a paid publication, whether the publisher uses a fulfillment house, and if the publisher wants an app/WordPress plug-in.



User Experience

Reader Perspective

Zinio is an online newsstand where readers can purchase some of today's most popular titles, e.g. Canadian Living, GQ, National Geographic, and People. Single issues or subscriptions are available at costs controlled by individual publishers.

Readers can search for publications by category (Men, Women, News, Lifestyle, etc.) and subcategories. The News category, for example, can be further narrowed to Business, Education and Politics, among others. Readers can also perform a keyword search or browse "Featured," "Top Sellers," and "New Arrivals" lists.

Searching for publications is an enjoyable experience on desktop platforms, but the mobile application is convoluted and requires some effort to understand how it functions.

Since magazines available in the online store do not include previews, it can be assumed that Zinio is targeted towards readers interested in purchasing digital editions of their favourite print publications. Users can also read free articles from a varying selection of publications in the "Read Articles" tab to stimulate interest in these magazines.

The Zinio reader is a simple flipbook application that mimics the appearance of a magazine's print edition. However, unlike Issuu, which can be viewed in an already-open browser, the Zinio reader opens in a new window, which may prove frustrating to some users.

Readers may also become frustrated by load times and email notifications as these are automatically sent each time an issue has completed downloading.

Like most flipbook applications, Zinio fails to adapt to different device sizes, meaning users must clumsily zoom, click and drag across the page in order to read content. Some publications, however, allow users to read a text-only version. While this greatly improves the reading experience, and may be helpful for the print-impaired reader, it obviously eliminates all visual content, which can be a significant part of the reader experience, depending on the magazine.

Zinio editions, however, do contain both internal and external links, allowing readers to better navigate within a publication. Readers can click an article title within the table of contents and automatically be directed to that page within the reader. Like Issuu, the Zinio reader – as well as the application itself – appears to function best on tablet devices.

With a poorly-functioning reader platform and little to no additional content, Zinio offers few benefits to readers. Instead, it appears to function primarily as a distribution service that allows publishers to provide readers with digital editions for controlled costs.



Overview

Magzter is a self-service, digital newsstand available on Apple, Android, Windows 8, Kindle Fire, Nook and desktop platforms. Once publishers have uploaded their PDFs to Magzter's cloud-based dashboard, they can add multimedia and other interactive elements before publishing their magazines across all platforms. Magzter's website states that while there are no upfront costs, they operate on a revenue sharing model, the details of which are not publicly available. This means that for however many magazines are sold, Magzter will take a percentage of the sales. Actual percentages were not given.



Special Features

Refer a Friend

Magzter users can send emails to family members and friends and, should these individuals choose to sign-up for a free account with 30-day free Magzter GOLD access, users will receive a \$15 Amazon gift card.

User Experience

Reader Perspective

Like Zinio, Magzter is a newsstand application that allows users to purchase single issues and subscriptions – 3 months, 6 months or 1 year – for prices that are controlled by each magazine's publishers. Select publications are sold for discount prices during annual sales and in conjunction with other publications in "Bundles". Users can also select to receive a notification if their favourite magazine goes on sale.

In addition to category and keyword searches, users can view "Featured," "New Arrivals," and "International" lists. Although large-circulation publications are available (e.g. *Reader's Digest*), they don't appear to be very prominent. Instead, Magzter seems to feature lesser-known publications, which may allow readers to regularly find new titles. The Magzter store also gives readers a preview of each publication – it's the digital equivalent of flipping through pages of a magazine at your local newsstand.

While the Issuu and Zinio applications vary depending on which device is being used – there are menu items, for example, that appear on the desktop platform but do not appear on tablet or mobile – Magzter remains the same across all devices, and this level of consistency creates a better experience for users.

Magzter's tablet and mobile application, however, had additional features that further enhance users' ability to find publications of interest. Upon logging into an account for the first time, users are asked to select their favourite topics from a list of interests; the app then tailors featured titles towards each reader's specific likes. Users can also follow different "Communities" for articles that other users with similar interests suggest, i.e. "Animals and Pets", "Educational Columns", "Sports Updates", etc.

Magzter provides readers with interactive flipbook publications that are enhanced with HTML 5 content, including video and audio, slideshows and image galleries, hyperlinks and other interactive content.

Of all flipbook applications reviewed, Magzter issues appear to have the best resolution: images were sharp and there was no evidence of aliasing (jagged, pixelated appearance on low resolution screens) on textual elements. This high production quality, however, may affect the application's overall performance as publications often required long download times.

Although the Magzter reader has superior production quality, the application is limited because of its simple flipbook software; the overall experience is best on tablet devices, but magazines are difficult to read on both desktop and mobile platforms. The Magzter reader's navigation and social sharing are also less intuitive than those of other reviewed flipbook apps.

Please note that Magzter also has an option for publishers to create branded apps, but their website states you must be part of their revenue sharing agreement to have access to this feature. Since Magzter has not responded to a request for details on this agreement, we are not able to provide further information or recommendations.



Overview

The Mag+ software allows publishers to design, build and distribute digital editions and branded apps; the company has developed a series of free software tools that will aid publishers throughout the production process:

Maq+ Feature Builder An InDesign plugin for CS4 and higher allows publishers to create interactive

HTML content (image galleries, slideshows, etc.) without code.

Mag+ Production Once pages have been designed, publishers can use the Production tool to

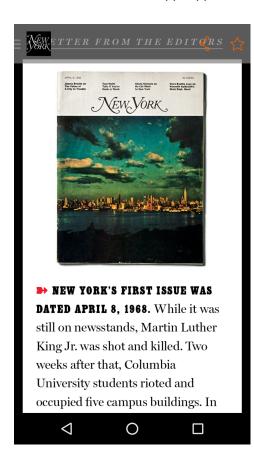
organize and customize their digital issues and apps.

Mag+ Reviewer Available for free in app stores, this tool allows publishers to review their work

on an actual device before publishing.

Mag+ Publish is where publishers can control the distribution of their branded

app. Apps can be uploaded to iTunes, Google Play or the Amazon App Store



Special Features (additional charges may apply)

Third Party Services

Mag+ has partnered with several app marketing and mobile relationship management providers, including Appboy, Oplytic, AdMarvel and Subsplus. Publishers can also select their preferred analytics software: Omniture, Localytics, Flurry and Google.

Push Notifications and Targeted Messaging

The publisher can send push notifications, in-app messages and newsfeed items to all readers, or select a specific audience (i.e. subscribers versus non-subscribers).

Precise Issue Control

Publishers can control access and distribution; offer bonus issues, enable user-login or remotely delete issues from a device ("Product Features – Delivery and Distribution," Mag+).

User Experience

Reader Perspective

Mag+ assists publishers in creating branded apps which, compared to flipbook publications, are enjoyable to read on every device. Magazines do not have to be downloaded from a third-party digital newsstand, but can instead be accessed directly from a device's app store, e.g. iTunes and Google Play.

Well-known consumer titles as well as smaller publications have been created using Mag+ software, each of which has been developed with their readers' specific needs in mind using responsive design. The *New York Magazine* application, for example, features a daily news feed with stories compiled from their website and blogs, as well as access to their digital publication. The app functions differently than *nymagazine.com* – it is a separate product only available on tablet that serves an audience more interested in reading digital publications than printed ones. *Compassion Magazine*, on the other hand, is a small quarterly publication that functions similarly across all platforms.

The Mag+ Reviewer comes equipped with a *Design Examples* guide that introduces publishers to some of the interactive features that can be added to a Mag+ application. Each feature -- pop-up windows, image galleries, video, presentation styles and so on -- can be applied in several different ways. Presentation, for example, can be single page or multi-page while videos can be looping, inline, or full-screen. These features give publishers the opportunity to include additional content within their publications. Mag+ publications can also be read regardless of screen orientation.

Rather than attempting to simply transport printed publications onto a digital platform, Mag+ helps publishers create a product that is intended to be used on mobile and tablet devices, allowing readers to further interact with a brand and its content.



Overview

With the 3D Issue publishing suite, publishers can choose to convert PDFs into digital flipbooks, or create their own native applications. Publishers can also use the 3D Issue publishing suite software to create dashboards - content hubs that display material from all of a publisher's websites, blogs and social media feeds. There are more than 250,000 3D Issue software installations.



Special Features

Collaborative Editing

The 3D Issue software allows for multiple authors to work on a single publication. Much like a WordPress website, writers' email addresses need to be authorized by an administrator before they can submit content.

Cloud Hosting

Hosting for publication flipbooks is available at \$299 per year and includes a built-in password protection system, social buttons on the pages of the flipbooks linking readers to publishers' social media pages, and hosting from Amazon CloudFront, a content delivery system (CDN) based server system, which improves access speed for downloading content.

User Experience

Reader Perspective

Compared to Issuu, Zinio and Magzter, the 3D Issue platform does not seem very intuitive. Its primary website is convoluted: navigation is unclear and it is difficult to determine which actions need to be taken in order to move forward. Rather than being intended for consumer use, it appears that the 3D Issue platform is intended to be more strictly used by publishers – it's an all-in-one software that allows them to create flipbook editions, native applications and content hubs.

3D Issue publications fail to provide publishers with options for customization. Each of the native application examples listed on the 3D Issue website (We Are EBay, Lego Education and Wacker Neusen), for instance, all function in the exact same way. The same can also be said of their hub and flipbook examples. Although publishers can choose to add a variety of rich media to their flipbook applications, such as video, audio, photo galleries, and internal and external links, these features appear to function in a rudimentary fashion, especially when compared to a platform like Mag+.

Accessing 3D Issue publications may also prove difficult for readers. Sean McNulty, a member of the company's Business Development team, provided links to several hub and flipbook examples for review (including a hub by Coca Cola and a flipbook edition by Oxford Brookes University), but they do not appear to be accessible from any additional channels - they were not available in iTunes or Google Play app stores, and they were nowhere to be found on the publishers' website.

From a reader's point of view, 3D Issue appears to take a "cookie-cutter" approach to digital publishing, which consequently, results in a poor experience that does little to enhance users' connections to a publication or brand.

Comparison Charts

Standard Features

	Free Trial	Rich Media & Interactive Content	Social Sharing	Technical Support/ Help Center	Analytics	Ads & Monetization*	Native & Branded Apps
Issuu	X	X	X	X	Х		
Zinio		X	Х	X	Х		
Magzter		X	Х	X	Х		Х
Mag+		X	Х	Х	X	X	Х
3D Issue		X	Х	Х	Х		Х

^{*}Monetization refers to the app/website's ability to generate revenue. This can be done a number of ways, but the method most relevant to this study is selling advertising space.

User Experience Ratings

1= poor 2= basic 3= good 4= great

	Intuitive	Navigation	Features	Customizable	Overall
Issuu	4	2	3	2	2.75
Zinio	3	2	2	3	2.5
Magzter	3	3	3	3	3
Mag+	3	3	4	4	3.5
3D Issue	1	2	3	2	2

Plans/Costs *Zinio and Magzter operate on a revenue-sharing model, the details of which vary and must be requested.

Plan	Issuu	Zinio*	Magzter*	Mag+	3D Issue
Basic	Free 500 pages (100mb) Publisher Tools	Revenue-sharing Zinio takes 20% for in app purchases & 50% for newsstand purchases.	Contact Magzter for more info	\$999 One-time fee One app Push Notifications Analytics	
Starter	\$19/month Billed annually 500+ pages (100mb) Publisher Tools Standalone Reader 14-day free trial	Revenue-sharing plan offers: Apple/Android apps App upgrades Edit content/ads Analytics 1 year back issues Marketing and promo access	N/A	\$1199 Per content update One app Pay as you publish	\$75/month (Billed annually) 2 installs (Mac/PC) 50GB Cloud Hosting 1 branded library Full access to all 3D Issue features except White Label
Premium	\$35/month Billed annually 5000+ pages (500mb) Publisher Tools Branded Reader Advanced Analytics Non-Member Downloads Schedule Releases Priority Support Limited API Access 14-day free trial	N/A	N/A	\$499/month 12 month commitment One app Unlimited Publishing Push Notifications Analytics Ability to Update Apps In-App Store/Library Third-Party Marketing and Messaging Tools	\$169/month Billed annually 5 installs (Mac/PC) 250GB Cloud Hosting 2 branded library Full access to all 3D Issue features (except White Label)
Optimum	\$269/month Billed annually 5000+ pages (500mb) Publisher Tools Branded Reader Unlisted Publications Advanced Analytics Team Collaboration Non-Member Downloads Schedule Releases Priority Support Unlimited API Access 14-day free trial	N/A	N/A	\$699/month 12 month commitment One app Unlimited publisher Web Export* Push Notifications Analytics Ability to Update Apps In-App Store/Library Third-Party Marketing Subscription API Enterprise iOS Build Web Export of App Content Ability to Host Yourself	\$549/month Billed monthly 5 installs (Mac/PC) 1TB Cloud Hosting 50 branded library Full access to all 3D Issue features
Lifetime					
Lite					\$499 1 install (Mac/PC) Self-hosting 1 branded library Access to some 3D Issue features

Professional	\$1299 1 install (Mac/PC) Self-hosting 1 branded library Cloud Services Full access to all 3D Issue features
Enterprise	\$2699 5 install (Mac/PC) Self-hosting 1 branded library Cloud Services Full access to all 3D Issue features

Recommendations

Our research suggests that Issuu has the best price/performance ratio, while Zinio is a better option for large magazines with strong reader bases. Magzter and Mag+ offer more special features and customizability for an increased price, while 3D Issue is geared more towards companies looking to create flipbooks that promote business products.

Final Words

Does it make sense to publish a digital magazine? There is no single answer that applies to all magazines. Though readership levels are generally lower for digital magazines compared to print editions and websites, digital magazines open new opportunities for publishers, from the ability to create deeply engaging reader experiences that are accessible anywhere and anytime, the potential to learn more about readers, to revenue-building opportunities from new subscriber and advertising channels.

In return, digital editions require resources, whether that means people, budget or both. Understanding current digital magazine usage trends, platforms, and reader preferences is an important first step in determining whether publishing a digital edition can further your business goals.

Appendix A

8 Best Practices For Digital Magazine Publishers

by Alyssa Schwartz

Once you've made the decision to go ahead with a digital edition, these best practices can help ensure its success.

1. Add value with exclusive features and content.

Some – but not all – digital magazine platforms allow publishers to easily and seamlessly insert new pages as they transform issues from print. These can be used to create digital exclusives –which can help drive print and web readers to your digital edition – and to create enhanced advertising offerings.

But these value-adds are only a driver if readers know they exist, so make sure to promote digital exclusives in-book and on your website.

2. Use - but don't overuse - multimedia features.

Features such as video, scrolling text boxes and pop-up slideshows are a great way to bring your content to life and create a more interactive reading experience, and they are generally enjoyed by readers. In one study, scrollable text and clickable links were rated the two most important features of digital editions.

But just because you can add all of the bells and whistles, doesn't mean you should. Too many features on a page can overwhelm the reader and make your digital issue feel gimmicky. Instead of using every option available, limit your use of features to the ones that make sense for the specific content, and try not to add more than one or two interactive elements to each page or story.

3. Keep an eye on file size.

There's another reason besides reading experience to use interactive features strategically – overuse grows the file size of your issues, increasing data use and download times.

Meanwhile, studies have shown that reducing file size can have an impact on readership – for example, when National Geographic shrunk the file size of its digital edition from 567 MB to 286 MB, download completion rates grew from 68 to 88 per cent.

4. Measure your results.

Though some digital magazine platforms offer only basic analytics such as number of downloads, others provide publishers with a detailed snapshot of how readers interact with your magazine, down to how long they spend interacting with specific features.

Take some time to identify which metrics will help you understand how readers use your digital editions, and use your results to evolve your strategy as required.

5. Create a landing page for your website.

Readers can't download your digital edition if they don't know about it, so make sure to promote your digital magazine in-book and online. Consider creating a landing page for your website which displays cover art for new and archived issues, lists content and promotes digital exclusives, and includes direct links to download.

Though digital editions themselves tend not to be well optimized for social sharing, an attractive landing page is an asset you can promote across your social media channels (and is search-engine friendly, too).

6. Start a newsletter.

To that effect, it's also a good idea to incorporate your digital magazine into your e-newsletter strategy. Use your newsletter to let readers know when your new issue is ready and incorporate stories from your digital edition within your newsletter content mix.

7. Use push notifications.

Push notifications are in-device alerts that are sent to a user even they are not actively using your app and research shows they can as much as double download rates.

In addition to notifying readers of the availability of new issues, consider using alerts to promote timely articles from your digital editions or to remind readers of your magazine during high-use periods. (Not sure when those are? Use your analytics!).

8. Replace your website.

Does your magazine actually need a website? Believe it or not, the answer is not necessarily. Though a website seems like a given these days, it may not make the most strategic sense for all publications – for example, smaller magazines that publish just a few times a year and produce no online content in the interim.

Why? For starters, search engines favor websites that constantly roll out fresh content. Secondly, the deeper reading experience digital magazines offer may be better suited to in-depth, long-form content.

If you do decide to forego a website, however, that doesn't mean ditching the URL – use your website to redirect mobile traffic directly to your app and keep a landing page on your desktop site so that readers know where to find you.

Appendix B

Company Contact Information

As of November 21, 2017

*Most companies require inquiries/questions to be submitted via an online form. Emails have been provided with permission from addressee.

	Contact*	HQ Address	Home Page URL
Issuu	support@issuu.com	131 Lytton Ave Palo Alto, CA 94301 United States	https://issuu.com/
Zinio	https://support.zinio.c om/hc/en- us/requests/new	575 Lexington Ave, Floor 17, New York, NY, 10022 United States	https://ca.zinio.com/www/#/
Magzter	https://www.magzter. com/publisherSupport	One Rockefeller Plaza 11th Floor New York, NY, 10020 United States	https://www.magzter.com/
Mag+	https://www.magplus. com/contact	MPS North America 404 5th Avenue New York, NY 10018 United States	https://www.magplus.com/
3D Issue	patrick@3dissue.com	IDA Business Park, Lisnennan Letterkenny Co. Donegal, Ireland	https://www.3dissue.com/

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