What is the difference between a scholarly periodical and a popular periodical?

Generally speaking, the primary difference is in the content and reputation/reliability of the periodical, which would also then imply differences in the purpose, author, audience, etc. as well.

First, let’s review some basic terms:

- **Serial**: a publication issued in same-titled successive parts, usually on a regular basis, for an indefinite period. This is a broad category and includes both newspapers and periodicals (Reitz, 2004-2010, “Serial”).
  - **Periodical**: generally the same as a serial yet excludes newspapers, annuals, or proceedings. Both journals and magazines are considered periodicals (Reitz, 2004-2010, “Periodical”).
    - **Magazine**: generally considered a popular interest periodical on a variety of topics, written in a non-scholarly style. They are usually heavily illustrated and contain advertising (Reitz, 2004-2010, “Magazine”). These are NOT considered “scholarly” resources.
    - **Journal**: a periodical devoted to original scholarly/academic research and commentary on subjects within a specific discipline or area of study. The articles are usually longer than those of magazines and usually contain bibliographies/reference lists. Many are peer-reviewed (Reitz, 2004-2010, “Journal”) and are generally considered to be “scholarly”.
  - **Peer-reviewed**: refers to an article being subjected to the process of critical evaluation by subject experts (also known as referees) prior to being accepted for publication. One or more accepted experts are selected by the editorial staff to review and evaluate the work, often in a double-blind context (meaning neither the author nor the referees are aware of each other’s identity) to negate possible bias. The author might even be required to revise his/her work in light of the referee’s review prior to the article’s final acceptance. A peer-reviewed journal may also be known as a “juried journal” or a “refereed journal” (Reitz, 2004-2010, “Peer-reviewed”).
  - **Trade Journal**: a periodical devoted to research, news, and/or items of interest to a specific field, discipline, or occupation (Reitz, 2004-2010, “Trade Journal”).

**Popular periodicals**, then, are commonly known as magazines. Their articles are generally brief, written in common, colloquial language, covering common-interest topics and/or news. The collections of periodicals usually found in waiting rooms are good examples of popular magazines. They are not peer-reviewed and are not considered scholarly.

**Scholarly periodicals**, on the other hand, are commonly known as journals. Their articles are generally longer, written by subject professionals, in scholarly/professional language, to a like-professional (or student) audience. Bibliographies/reference lists are almost always included, and most scholarly publications are peer-reviewed.

Note: technically, “peer-reviewed” refers only to those journals that use a non-editorial staff peer-review process. Thus, while all peer-reviewed journals may be considered scholarly, strictly
speaking, not all scholarly journals are peer-reviewed. Neither Harvard Business Review nor Chronicle of Higher Education, for example, are “peer-reviewed,” yet they are universally considered to be “scholarly.” That said, in casual parlance, “peer-reviewed,” “scholarly,” and “academic” are all generally used interchangeably.

To further complicate matters, trade or “professional” periodicals are journals that exist sort of in between the popular and scholarly ends of the periodical spectrum. While not exactly “scholarly” per se, they cover occupational topics, reviews, or news of interest for specific fields or disciplines and are generally reliable sources of information.

As might be apparent, the boundaries between these different types of resources can sometimes be vague. Learning how to critically analyze one’s resources and then use (or not use!) them appropriately is an important skill to develop. For example, it may be appropriate to cite a scholarly journal as an authority and a trade journal or popular magazine as evidence in the same paper. The key is to understand the purpose and reliability of one’s resources and thus their proper roles in one’s paper. Any questions relating to the role or acceptability of a specific resource should be directed to one’s professor or instructors.

Note: Ulrichsweb.com (accessible under “U” in UNT’s Electronic Resources) is a helpful bibliography that shows the status/category of different periodicals. Enter and search for the periodical in question and look for the “refereed” symbol on the left-hand side or click on the entry and look for the “document type” and “refereed” elements in the item’s main record.

The above information is here condensed into a comparative table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Popular</th>
<th>Scholarly</th>
<th>Trade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To inform and entertain, across a broad variety of topics</td>
<td>To submit research and discuss ideas in specific areas/subjects</td>
<td>To apply knowledge/skills and offer professional support in specific fields/occupations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audience</strong></td>
<td>General public</td>
<td>Researchers, academics, students</td>
<td>Researchers, practitioners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Characteristics</strong></td>
<td>• Shorter articles</td>
<td>• Longer articles</td>
<td>• Shorter articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Issued frequently</td>
<td>• Issued less frequently</td>
<td>• Issued frequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Everyday language</td>
<td>• Scholarly language and subject-specific jargon</td>
<td>• Technical language and trade-specific jargon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Advertisements</td>
<td>• No advertisements</td>
<td>• Advertisements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• No references or bibliographies</td>
<td>• Full references and bibliographies</td>
<td>• Some references and bibliographies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples</strong></td>
<td>Time, Newsweek, Reader' Digest</td>
<td>Cuneiform Digital Library Journal</td>
<td>Oil &amp; Gas Journal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following websites may also prove helpful:

- http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/rul/indexes/scholarly_articles.shtml
- http://www.library.cornell.edu/olinuris/ref/research/skill20.html
- http://www.unf.edu/library/guides/refereedarticle.html
- http://lib.calpoly.edu/research/guides/peer.html

References: