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What do women want? Women, Social Change and the UK Magazine Market

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Abstract

The changing depictions of working or 'New' women in the women's magazine industry of the 1980s and 1990s can be understood more clearly when we consider them in relation not only to feminist accounts of commercial culture, but also to a closer analysis of commercial practices. Far from 'foisting' magazines (whether they be print or online) on an unsuspecting 'market gap' of women, this paper shows that where 'gaps' in the market are identified, the translation of this into a product that women will want to read is much more difficult. Instead, it is argued that the economic practices of magazine publishing can only be understood when we also think about them in terms of the cultural conditions in which they exist.

Keywords

Media, Women, Social Change, Magazine Market

In August 2007, *The Observer* newspaper devoted a double page spread to events in the women's magazine market in the UK. The industry, it claimed, was at a 'turning point', with all sectors witnessing a decline in sales (Robinson, 2007a: 10). The women's monthly sector, known as the 'glossies', seemed particularly hard hit. Traditionally a means of targeting young, professional middle-class women, established monthly titles including *Vogue*, *Red*, *Elle* and *Glamour* were seeing sales decline by up to 10 per cent in the previous six months. More dramatically, EMAP's long-standing title, *New Woman*, had lost a quarter of its sales in the same period. As magazine executives attempted to make sense of the downturn in sales, many blamed the Internet for stealing their readerships. 'It's all about digital now', said one industry executive. It is 'now a completely different media landscape'" (quoted in Robinson, 2007a: 11).

The stagnation of the women's magazine market seems symbolic of a changing

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relationship between female identities, consumer culture, and the media. In an analysis of the women's magazine market in late twentieth century Britain, I have traced its revitalisation following a similar period of demise in the face of increased commercial competition from 'new' media, television in particular (Gough-Yates, 2003). Of central importance to the survival of the industry were the attempts of market researchers, advertisers and magazine publishers to move away from classic socio-demographic forms of market segmentation that positioned middle-class women as 'ABC1 housewives with children' (see Winship, 1987: 46). The ability of the magazine industry to revitalize its monthly titles in the 1980s and 1990s was closely linked to commercial discourses about, and interpretations of, the 'lifestyles' of young, middle class, women. It was around the rather nebulous figure of a 'New Woman' as a target market that the publishers of 'glossy' monthly titles eventually oriented themselves. This 'New Woman' was understood to be some distance away from more traditional feminine scripts - employed, financially independent, and with money to spend outside of the domestic sphere. It is to the origins and significance of the 'New Woman' of the 1980s and 1990s that this paper now turns, situating her within an historical context, before returning to the events that have seen her superseded by other icons of femininity, and the women's magazine industry struggling to 'understand' women once more.¹

Feminism, Consumer Culture, and the 'Cultural Industries'

Perhaps surprisingly, it was the fragmentation of the UK and US women's movement in the late 1970s that first pointed to the diversity of femininities that existed within specific social settings and within society. Whilst the all-inclusive definitions of femininity offered by 'sex-roles' theorists (such as Talcott Parsons (1951)) had come under attack from second-wave feminists, so too did the idea of a feminist 'sisterhood' united by resistance to 'patriarchal' oppression, which many women felt were concepts that marginalised and excluded them (see Hollows, 2000: 6-7). As Joanne Hollows (2000: 6-7) has observed, the theories of universal oppression that had emerged largely from the consciousness-raising groups of the period, largely reflected the life experiences of middle-class white women. While white, middle-class spokeswomen for the women's movement might see the source of their oppression as a product of the sexual division of labour, they failed to recognise that for many black and/or working-class women, for example, gender was only one site of oppression among many (Hollows, 2000: 6. See also Ramazanoglu, 1989; hooks, 1982; Fox Genovese, 1991).

The UK and US women's movement of this period had also attacked the role of consumer culture and the media in contributing to the oppression of women. Writers such as Betty Friedan (1963) were concerned that the location of women's primary role in society in the sphere of consumption (as opposed to the male world of production) enslaved her to the capitalist system and its gendered division of labour. Furthermore, her alienation from production led her to passively absorb the pernicious images of 'unrealistic' femininity that were foisted upon her, and undermined her essential, 'real' feminine identity which would find true fulfilment in the world of work (Hollows, 2000: 113). A broad feminist consensus about women's relationship to consumer culture and media texts largely remained until the early 1980s. However, by this point a number of feminist writers, informed by postmodern and poststructuralist theories, had questioned the orthodoxy that feminism must be entirely oppositional to the sphere of consumption, and to the popular culture that the majority of women consumed.

Firstly, many feminists began to question the idea that 'real' images of women could actually exist, and to ask who's reality would be represented. In feminist media criticism that focused on 'false' images of femininity, it was the feminist critic who would define whether an image was 'real' or not. Thus, more 'realistic' representations of reality were based upon the feminist's own experience, whilst 'false' images were representations that the rest of the audience 'passively' absorbed (see Hollows and Moseley, 2006: 4-5). Second, a number of feminist theorists began to argue that the alignment of women with the sphere of consumption not only underplayed the role of consumption in household and domestic production (see, for example, Lury, 1996; Attfield, 1995), but also presumed that the meanings of goods were inscribed in the production process. As writers including Ang (1985) and Winship (1987) observed, commercial goods and their meanings change as they are contextualized in social lives. Lastly, some feminist writers began to point to the ways in which feminist ideas and themes were circulating within commercial culture (see, for example, Brunson, 1986). A mainstream magazine like *Cosmopolitan*, for example, with its focus on female independence and sexual liberation, clearly drew on elements of feminist discourse of the 1960s and 1970s. That isn't to argue that *Cosmopolitan* was a feminist magazine. However, the magazine was negotiating with the realities of women's lives, an element of which were the discourses of feminism, and incorporating some ideas that could be deemed 'feminist' into a mainstream magazine format.²

We have seen how feminist interest in commercial culture has largely focused on the power of women consumer's to create meanings through consumption, the potential for resistance through consumption, or on the commodification of feminist ideas. However, more recent work on the cultural industries has suggested an alternative route for thinking about women and consumption. Instead of understanding the commercial media as an 'enemy' of 'reality', a mere tool of capitalism, or as a cynical 'packager' of feminism for commercial gain, a number of studies have attempted to reconceptualise the relationships between the producers of commercial culture and consumers (see du Gay, 1996; Mort, 1996; Nixon, 1996; McRobbie, 1998; Crewe, 2003; Gough-Yates, 2003). This work understands the relationships between producers and consumers to be 'closer', more 'personal' and more dynamic than seen in earlier work in the social sciences. Through examinations of the work cultures of producers, their commercial practices, and the representations of consumers and products that are produced, the sphere of contemporary consumer culture is envisaged as a site where an abundance of identities are sought, configured, delineated, dramatised, represented, and re-presented back to the consumer. From the perspective of thinking about women and consumption, consumer culture is envisaged as a site that both *produces* and *reflects* lived femininities. It is a place where the identities of 'real women' are not merely ignored, or configured for ideological purposes. Indeed, the lives of 'real women' are under close scrutiny from the commercial sphere, which aims to understand women's lives as they are lived and understood by women themselves.

These accounts of the changing relationships between producers and consumers rest upon a number of theories about the nature of economic change in the UK that we should consider here. In particular, this body of 'cultural industries' work frames these shifts within a Fordist/post-Fordist paradigm. Generally, the Fordist era of mass production and mass consumption (and its associated economic, political and social structures) is seen as giving way to a new epoch characterized by more flexible approaches to manufacturing and the rise of plural consumer markets. Theorists of post-

Fordism highlight, in particular, a series of production changes in manufacturing since the 1970s. Driven by the demands of retailers, they point to the ways in which new technologies such as electronic point of sale (EPOS), in conjunction with computerized manufacturing methods, are employed to 'overcome the limits of the mass product' (Murray, 1989: 43). Technology has facilitated change in manufacturing processes, helping producers to develop and sell more differentiated ranges of products, in response to the vagaries of demand (du Gay, 1996; Nixon, 1996).

In addition, manufacturers and retailers have come to rely on 'ranges of products geared to segments of the market' (Murray, 1989: 43) – with the rise of new, more specialized forms of design and market research strategies geared to more specific market 'niches'. Consumers, therefore, and their social and cultural experiences, become more closely tied into the decision-making processes in the sphere of production (Lury, 1994; Nixon, 1996). These processes operate across a range of commercial markets, from food to fashion, to furniture to magazines. These attempts to be more sensitive to the consumer also lead to a heavy reliance on design and visual awareness as a means of gaining market advantage (Mort, 1989: 167-8). Consumers are understood to be expecting something 'more' from consumption, requiring it to fulfil rational and information, as well as 'emotional', needs. Advertisers and marketers, therefore, 'appeal to the unique *you*', offering 'a proliferation of individualities, of the number of "yous" on offer (Mort 1989: 168).

'Lifestyle' Markets and the 'New Woman'

It has been through this Fordist/post-Fordist framework that I have understood the development of monthly titles for a 'New Woman' within the women's magazine sector of the mid-1980s (Gough-Yates, 2003). In the early 1980s, consumer markets aimed at women were widely believed to be stagnant, and advertisers and marketers were compelled to re-assess the social and economic roles of women in Britain. This resulted in the development of a new range of commercial identities for women that both attempted to keep up with women's changing relationships to the workforce, in particular, and which also (it was hoped) would result in new dynamics of purchasing power, patterns and demands. The young, middle class, working woman became an aspirational figure for the consumer industries, but the advertising trade press expressed dismay as to what they perceived as a glaring lack of appropriate media vehicles with which to 'speak' to her. To many in the advertising industry, it seemed that the existing monthly 'glossy' magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue* were proving incapable of reaching the buying power of professional and executive women, and publishers were implored to adopt new media and marketing strategies as a response to the growing diversification of women's lives (see Gough-Yates, 2003: 67-78).

Perhaps paradoxically, the quickest responses from the consumer industries to the shifting social, economic and cultural contours of women's lives came from those that had traditionally targeted women in terms of their domestic roles. For example, the images of convenience foods such as McCain's oven chips, Bird's Eye Walls' 'Menu Master' range of ready-made meals, and Homepride's Cook-In-Sauces were all reconfigured in advertising campaigns that addressed women in a way that acknowledged their working lives. The cosmetics industry too responded, with 'long-lasting' ranges of make-up such as Max Factor's Colourfast being marketed towards working women with little time to spare during their hectic schedules, and two-in-one products such as

deodorant/perfumes being pitched towards 'busy women' with little time to spend on themselves (Nuttall, 1983: 22-4). The choice of media in which to promote these products was, however, problematic. Whilst ranges of women's magazines existed, their seemingly outdated depictions of women's lives that revolved around 'homes, babies, cooking, clothes and sex' (Campbell-Lyons, 1983: 45), and the dramatic decline in their circulation figures, suggested to many in the advertising industry that television channels (such as Channel 4) might be more appropriate environments. Others were more optimistic about the potential of women's magazines as an advertising medium, and felt that they had the potential to be the ideal medium for reaching these new target groups. However, it was widely thought that for the potential of magazines to be realized, publishers would need to be less nervous of change, and more willing to move away from their formulaic and outdated approach to design and editorial content (Gough-Yates, 2003: 77).

Given that the women's magazine sectors of their businesses were in financially perilous positions, the large publishers such as IPC and the National Magazine Company were initially very reluctant to reorganize their practices and/or to invest in new monthly magazine launches, largely preferring to re-launch existing titles such as *Honey* for a new market of professional women (Driver and Gillespie, 1993b: 185). Indeed, it was independent publishers who made the first real attempt to move into the 'glossy' women's market, and they were spurred on by the growing amount of market research that was being conducted into the shifting lifestyles of women. As early as 1983, for example, the Social Futures Group of the Henley Centre for Forecasting had 'discovered a group of women, 'The Divorcynic', who had an 'underestimated inclination to spend money on themselves' (Mason, 1983: 41). A more extensive and better-publicized piece of market research was McCann-Erickson's 'Woman Study' of 1985. A 'sister' report to a successful 'Man Study' of the previous year (Restall, 1985: 26-8), McCann Erickson's research indicated the existence of potentially fruitful 'lifestyle' groups such as 'the Lady Righteous', 'the Lively Lady', and 'the New Un-Romantic' who were variously idealistic, opinionated, self-aware, and independently spirited (Restall, 1985: 27). For advertisers, therefore, marketing to women based purely upon assumptions about their shared gender identity, and by their economic class, would fail to tap into the changing lifestyles and consumption patterns of women.

It was a newly formed, independent publishing company, Hal, that took the first step into a newly identified market of 'New Women' by launching a 'glossy' monthly title, *Working Woman*, for what it understood to be a professional, affluent, lifestyle group. Launched in 1984, its almost immediate failure with both advertisers and its target readerships confirmed, for many, that the women's magazine had seen its day. Prior to its launch, the idea of *Working Woman* had been widely welcomed by the advertising industry, which is evidenced by the extensive coverage the magazine received in the industry's trade publications. Yet on publication, its reception by advertisers and reader focus groups was cool, and it was criticized for being humourless, 'a bit intense and heavy going' and lacking in 'fun' (Cooper, 1984: 15). Others viewed its editorial as confused, with its combination of editorial on property-ownership, 'cop-out' cookery, business travel, building a fine art collection, and salaries. Advertising also seemed incongruous, with many advertisers appearing to be unsure about how to 'speak' to the target readership. By 1986, the magazine had gone into receivership (Payne, 1986: 12).³

The failure of *Working Woman* did not encourage the large, established publishing

organizations to attempt to enter a market for a 'New Woman' with any vigour. Indeed, it was the international media group News International, in association with French multimedia company Hachette, that in 1985 was the first to successfully construct a 'New Woman' market for itself through a monthly UK version of the popular French title, *Elle*. By 1988, IPC and a French company, Groupe Marie Claire, were following in their footsteps by launching another popular French title, *Marie Claire*. Whilst *Elle's* mode of address was described by its editor to be 'life...freshness...and *joie de vivre*' (Rawsthorn, 1985: 34), and *Marie Claire's* was about 'mood' and 'every single aspect of a woman's life' (Cumberpatch, 1988b, 23), the magazines shared a common goal. Both titles chose to target markets of professional middle class women, but in doing so, they chose not to orient their editorial around work. Instead, the focus of these titles was on 'style', with a notably 'European' inflection, as a route to achieving 'individuality' and pleasure in life. Whilst *Working Woman* had offered its readerships an editorial that was oriented around a more restrained ethos of satisfaction through work and professional identities, for *Elle* and *Marie Claire*, self-esteem and success could be achieved through a free and guiltless indulgence in consumer culture. The *Elle* and *Marie Claire* readers were understood to be working, but they made it their mission in life to keep up with the latest consumer trends, and with the dynamics of fashion.

The commercial success of *Elle* and *Marie Claire* led to a flurry of new 'glossy' titles in a similar vein. A British edition of a successful American title, *New Woman*, in 1988, published by News International, declared itself to be for a reader '[r]ealistic enough to know that sometimes we can't have it all, but optimistic enough' to give it [her] best shot' (*New Woman*, issue 1, August 1988: 3). The focus of *New Woman* was not, however, on fashion, but on the personal – on a working woman who was entirely wrapped up in 'You'. Not to be left out, National Magazines variously re-oriented a number of its existing women's titles (including *Cosmopolitan*, *Company* and *She*) around a range of 'lifestyle' identities that focused on 'the personal' and 'relationships'. Whilst inflected differently in the magazine editorial, they all broadly understood their 'ideal' readers to be 'new', young, affluent, and/or professional.⁴

Developing an understanding of why the commercial scripts offered by magazines like *Elle* and *New Woman* were more successful with women readers and advertisers than those offered by *Working Woman* is not simple. Furthermore, it is impossible to assess the extent to which women's magazine readers of this period practiced such lifestyles, dispositions and tastes prior to, or as a result of, reading women's magazines.⁵ There are, however, a number of interconnected developments that can go some way to making sense of the success of these magazines with their young, professional, middle-class readerships. Whilst the proportion of women participating in the British workforce had clearly increased – from 55 per cent of British women of working age in 1971, to 71 per cent in 1991 – it was certainly the higher socio-economic groups of women that were more likely to be in full- rather than part-time employment (Walby, 1997: 59-61). So the 'New Woman' wasn't entirely a fiction of the marketing imagination. Broadly speaking too, the political culture of the period was sympathetic to the discourses promoted in these magazines, and identities focused upon 'individualism' and 'enterprise' were promoted as a means for securing consent for consumption and the free-market (see Mort, 1989; Hayes, 1994; Cameron, 2000, and Leadbetter, 1989).

Another way of examining the commercial scripts on offer in the successful 'New Woman' publications, however, is through a range of sociological analyses from the early

1980s onwards, which pointed to the emergence and rise of ‘new’ social classes.⁶ Central to these accounts were a ‘new middle class’, thought to be predisposed towards a life of ‘fun’, and a fascination with identity, presentation and physical appearance (see Featherstone, 1991; Savage et. al, 1992; Longhurst and Savage, 1996).⁷ The ‘new middle class’ tastes and practices outlined in these studies are remarkably similar to the various ‘New Woman’ identities proposed by the magazines themselves.

Empirical evidence about middle-class women’s lives is also available in a small-scale account by Linda McDowell (1997). Her analysis of the changing patterns of work in the City of London post-1986 offers some support for the existence of a ‘new middle-class’ lifestyle orientation amongst middle-class women working in investment banks. In her study, McDowell (1997: 139) argues that there was a significant change in forms of work in the City post-1986, with workers increasingly blurring the distinctions between ‘work’ and ‘leisure’, and shifting from an ethos of work as a ‘duty’ to work as something that should be ‘fun’. This was reflected in a changing built environment, where architects worked to combine office buildings with small parks, piazzas, cafes and health clubs. McDowell (1992) notes also that the culture of the City workplace increasingly associated the successful worker with those who paid attention to ‘style’ and personal appearance. Her study does not provide us with any detail about the consumer practices of this occupational group, or their penchant (or otherwise) for women’s magazines. However, McDowell’s study does suggest that women’s magazines incorporating a ‘new middle class’ attitude might well have offered women financiers a rhetoric of young, middle-class femininities and lifestyles that would be congruent with their own identifications.

From this research, one might presume that the 1980s brought with it a shift towards women’s equality, characterized by their increasing ability to engage both in the workplace and in pleasurable forms of consumption. However, as Walby (1997-75) observes, the increased presence of images of financially independent, consumer-oriented femininities in the market also hid the persistence of inequalities in society. Whilst the conventional representations of women as ‘consuming housewives’ might have been undermined by ideations of a ‘New Woman’, other inequalities, including class divisions between women, were actually intensified during this period. As McDowell (1992) and Walby (1997) contend, it was only a minority of mainly white, middle – and upper-class women who reaped the rewards, traditionally reserved for men, of the developing opportunities in labour markets. In reality, the economic position of working class women declined, and for many the possibility of economic independence without an income from a male partner looked increasingly bleak (McDowell, 1992: 188; Walby, 1997: 59-61). Thus, while images of a ‘new woman’ suggested the possibilities of new and more independent feminine identities in society, class and ethnicity remained central to women’s inequality, and were a determining factor in their ability to participate in the workforce and in consumption outside of domestic reproduction.

There were some attempts by feminist media critics of this period to assess the extent to which ‘New Woman’ representations were indicative of shifts in gender politics deriving from second-wave feminism, and the potential of such representations to undermine traditional feminine identities. Imelda Whelehan (2000: 52) for example, argued that the gender relations of the 1990s underwent ‘some kind of quake’, whilst Angela McRobbie (1997: 159) attested to a shifting ‘semi-structure of feeling’ in the consciousness and experiences of the young. From an examination of the newly emergent market for

'lifestyle' magazines for men, the successful launches of titles such as *Arena* (launched 1986) and *GQ* (launched 1988) also suggested to some that masculinities were undergoing some form of transformation. Magazines for the 'new man' attempted to delineate new commercial identities for men, and shifted away from an image of the male 'breadwinner', conforming to traditional patriarchal codes (see Mort, 1996; Nixon, 1996; Crewe, 2003).

In an analysis of the 'new' women's magazines, Angela McRobbie (1996: 192) was remarkably positive about their content, and optimistic about their representations of femininity, that were 'strong, frank, and explicitly sexual'. McRobbie also spoke to employees of the magazines, finding them to be well versed in the languages of sexual politics. Keen magazine readers themselves, they were frequently graduates of university degree courses that had encouraged a critical understanding of media texts. Indeed, some of them retained an interest in media and cultural studies research, even identifying themselves as 'feminists' and concurring with feminist criticisms of women's magazines. Moreover, these employees asserted that their readers shared a similar world view. New magazines such as *Marie Claire* thus spoke to readers about sexuality in an idiom that was 'mocking and ironic' (1996: 183), this providing a counter-hegemonic space for 'critical reflection' that effectively turned the tables on the men who had traditionally scrutinized women as sexual objects within the universe of glossy magazines.

Other commentators were more sceptical about the feminist potential of 'New Woman' representations, and about the presence of feminism in the magazine pages. Janice Winship (1987: 150), for example, offered a reading that saw the 'New Woman' as a commercial 'appropriation of the cultural space of feminism opened up minus most of the politics'. Arguing that the 'New Woman' was, in effect, an unrealizable 'Superwoman', Winship (1987: 157) maintained that while the basis for such representations might be in the growing financial independence of middle-class women in their twenties and thirties, her elitism and focus on individual success left 'untouched the deep problems for most women of how to satisfactorily combine "home" and "work" without being made to suffer for it'.

It is impossible to decipher both the accuracy of the lifestyle orientations of these 'New Woman' magazines, their impact on femininities as they were lived, or their significance for feminism. Indeed, as we have seen with the examples here, the 'New Woman' was by no means a universal 'lifestyle' category across the women's press of this period. Whilst all of the magazines I have discussed targeted young, relatively independent women, there was actually little agreement about what form of editorial address would appeal to her. The 'New Woman' of this period cannot, therefore, be considered a target figure that was widely understood to be unified or coherent. Whilst many in the commercial industries claimed to have identified a 'New Woman' who was young, affluent and professional, she actually appears to have been little more than a comforting narrative about contemporary femininity. As a broad target market, she was embraced by an industry attempting to grasp a proliferation of shifting, fragmented, and multiple feminine identities adopted by women in everyday life. Indeed, these magazine industry ideations of 'New Women' are not interesting because of their coherence, but because of the ways in which they pulled their representations of femininity in a variety of different directions. The prominence of the 'New Woman' ideations discussed here also proved to be temporally specific. Indeed, by the mid-1990s, a rather different inflection of feminine culture was coming into play in the women's magazine market. It is appropriate here to

examine the conditions of these shifts.

Selling Celebrity: the Women's Weekly in the Early Twenty-first Century

From the mid-1990s onwards, most of the 'New Woman' magazines I have discussed so far attempted to up-date their images of young, middle-class femininity by altering their editorial mixes. Whilst fashion and beauty remained significant components within these titles, all increased their editorial focus on 'celebrity culture'. The women's glossies offered interviews and cover shoots with Hollywood film stars, popular singers and 'supermodels'. Some, particularly *Marie Claire*, even used celebrities such as Joan Collins as 'guest editors' for single issues.

In an American context, James Autry has observed the increase of what he terms 'celebrity journalism' within all forms of media, including fashion, news and sport of this period. Magazines, he argues, have been particularly driven by 'celebrity' as it has proved to be a sure-fire way of improving sales in recessionary conditions (Autry, 1998: 341-2). It would seem clear, therefore, that dwindling monthly circulations contributed to the movement of the British women's glossies into 'celebrity journalism'. Furthermore, by the turn of the century, a large number of the new and leading glossy monthly were celebrity led. Newcomers included Time Warner's *In Style*, that offered a mix of celebrity lifestyle, beauty and glamour, and Conde Nast's *Glamour*, that contained celebrity style, news and 'secrets'.

Another significant factor in the growth of the celebrity focus in the 'glossy' monthlies was undoubtedly the rising sales amongst a range of weekly celebrity magazines. These were spurred on by the launch of the weekly *Hello!* (a British version of the successful Spanish magazine *Hola!*), and its followers *OK!*, *Here!*, and *Now!*. Indeed by 1996, *Hello!* and *Here!* were regularly achieving circulation figures of just under 500,000 weekly copies each, figures that the glossies could not afford to ignore. To the concern of the 'glossy' women's titles, the celebrity weeklies were not only popular with readers, but also popular with advertisers. *Hello!* was the most successful in this respect, with over 80 per cent of the total advertising business in the celebrity weekly market. Advertisers were also impressed with the demographics of the celebrity weekly readership and their high ABC1 market penetration. According to the National Readership Survey, over 50 per cent of *Hello!*'s readers, for example, were in ABC1 socio-economic groups, and nearly 80 per cent were women under the age of forty-four (NRS, 1997). Unsurprisingly, therefore, more than half of *Hello!*'s advertisements were for luxury products, including Estee Lauder, Guerlain, and L'Oreal (*Marketing*, 1996: 27).

This was certainly a turnabout for the magazine industry. Traditionally, the women's weekly magazine had found its highest percentage of readers in the lower middle class and working class social grades of C1 and C2, D and E. Whilst readers of women's weeklies have ranged across all age groups, they have generally been believed to be more likely to have children than the readers of monthly titles, and the editorial has thus traditionally been pitched towards family and the domestic sphere. In the mid 1980s, the weekly sector had, in fact, been understood to be in a permanent state of decline, as women in their target groups were believed to be turning away from magazines to television. Even the publisher, IPC, that owned the major share of the weekly market, had almost given up on it, and was turning its attentions elsewhere (Braithwaite, 1989:

28).

However, post-1986, two of Germany's biggest publishers, Bauer and Gruner and Jahr (G & J), had moved into British weekly magazine sector, largely due to saturation of the market at home (Scott, 1989: 62). Offering new ranges of weekly titles including *Best* (launched 1987) and *Bella* (launched 1988) that focused on the domestic sphere, the aggressive business tactics of the German publishers proved successful with relatively young, working class readerships, ultimately compelling the older publishing houses to re-evaluate their production and marketing strategies for this sector (Braithwaite, 1989: 29). Nevertheless, the evidence of the mid 1990s that a weekly celebrity title such as *Hello!* could prove successful with readerships in the much sought after A and B social categories came as a big surprise to many in the industry.

It was EMAP who first attempted to step into the celebrity weekly market with its title *Heat*, launched in 1999. Beginning as a film and television weekly aimed at modern young women, or the '18-34 year old fashion-conscious shopaholic' (EMAP promotional material cited in Feasey, 2006), *Heat* initially failed to attract its target readership, and indeed it captured the hearts of few readers at all. It was a re-launch and re-orientation of *Heat* that transformed it into a best-selling weekly, with a focus on celebrity gossip, fashion and features. With a readership that proved to be largely under 44, and in the ABC1 category (NRS, 2001), *Heat* soon became an attractive prospect for advertisers. Enthused by its success in this market, EMAP soon followed it with another glossy women's celebrity weekly, *Closer*, launched in 2002.

Unsurprisingly, other publishers also wanted a share of the celebrity market. In 2000, G&J decided to pull out of business activity in the UK, and they sold their existing weekly titles to National Magazines, which until this point had a portfolio consisting entirely of monthly glossies. National Magazines moved to consolidate its position in the sector by forming a joint venture with Australian Consolidated Press (ACP), and by embarking on a high profile launch for a new celebrity weekly, *Reveal*, supported by a 16 million pound advertising campaign (Reid, 2006: 12). EMAP followed with a fashion import from Italy, *Grazia*, which claimed to be a 'weekly glossy', and not a 'glossy weekly' for an older, more upmarket readership with disposable income (Snoddy, 2005, 4-6). By 2006, a flurry of women's weekly celebrity titles including *Love It*, *First* and *Look* (for 18-30 women of the 'indulgence generation') were competing for their share of this market (Robinson, 2007b: 10). In pre-launch publicity, *Look*'s editor claimed to be even 'closer' to their high spending target readership than ever before, with editors and executives engaging in 'immersion research' by actually moving in with their potential readers (Thynne, 2007: 10)!

In the magazine industry, the reasons behind the success of the celebrity weeklies with their readers was thought to be the increasingly busy lifestyles of women, who were understood to enjoy relaxing with a weekly glossy as a 'my time' treat which could offer some escapism through the celebrity content (Mintel, 2006). In an academic examination of the celebrity weekly *Heat*, Rebecca Feasey (2006: 182-183) positions its success with readers in relation to the ways in which it spoke to the female consumer as in control, 'not only of her wardrobe but also of her sexuality and social situation', thus bringing an 'empowered image of woman into being'. She points also to the way in which *Heat* played with the representational conventions of traditional glossy monthlies, such as *Vogue*. Through its publication of celebrity photographs that have not been approved by

the celebrities or their PR experts, *Heat* encouraged its readers to negotiate media imagery and to see celebrities as 'ordinary', and indeed professional women, 'with extraordinary wardrobes' (Feasey, 2006: 185).

The success of the new celebrity weeklies had rapid knock on effects for the more traditional weekly titles, including IPC's *Woman* and *Woman's Own* which both saw declining sales. Even IPC's long established domestic weekly, *Woman's Realm*, closed in 2002, after 44 years on the newsstands. Moreover, despite attempts at new non-celebrity launches including *Red*, *Eve* and *Easy Living*, the sales of monthly magazine titles, and their share of advertising revenues, were generally in decline. Furthermore, the women's magazine market as a whole appeared to be diminishing, its overall sales figures falling year on year, and its share of advertising revenues in a downwards spiral (Robinson, 2007a: 10). Despite the growing numbers of actual titles on the market (it had increased in volume by 23% since 2001), there is not a growing audience of women readers (Mintel, 2006). The release of biannual circulation figures in August 2007 was exceptionally gloomy news for magazine executives, showing a picture of a magazine industry that was far from healthy (Robinson, 2007a: 10).

It should hardly have come as a surprise to magazine publishers that women were leaving magazines behind in droves. And it is not simply that women are too busy in their lives to read magazines. The challenge is, indeed, that the media usage of women is changing and fragmenting. Firstly, the women's magazine industry has had direct competition for an upmarket female audience from some newspaper titles. *The Sunday Times*, for example, has a glossy magazine supplement that features celebrity coverage, fashion, and home-interest features. *The Financial Times* is also targeting this audience with its high-fashion glossy supplement named *How to Spend It*. The benefits for the newspapers are twofold, in that they not only maintain their readership, but also attract the financial benefits from high spending, luxury good advertisers (Mintel, 2006). Second, there is increasing competition from book publishers, who have revived their markets by featuring titles targeted at women, or 'chick lit' titles such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Indeed, market research by Mintel in 2006 suggested that 52 per cent of consumers reading weekly celebrity titles also regularly read such books (Mintel, 2006). Last, but definitely not least, there have been significant technological advances that mean that women can now access the staple diet of celebrity women's magazines in a wider range of media, including radio and television, but most worryingly for magazine publishers, the Internet (Mintel, 2006).

Recent research by Ofcom has indicated that between 10 and 20 per cent of adults believe that they read magazines less often since they began using the Internet, which has increased in line with the growth of high speed Internet use in the home (Robinson, 2007a: 10). Moreover, in August 2007, Ofcom reported that there had also been a 'feminisation' of the Internet, with women in the 25-49 age bracket spending more time on the net than men, the most popular sites being Bebo for social networking, and the auction site Ebay (Allen, 2007). Where consumers go, advertisers of course, follow.

Some in the women's magazine industry have remained resolutely positive about the commercial possibilities the Internet offers them. They point, for example, to the power they already have in their existing brand names, and to the success of the men's music site, NME.com, and to profitable ventures that include vogue.co.uk. Websites are also cheaper to produce, and the content is easier to distribute when compared to the magazine market (Robinson, 2007a: 10). Some publishers are even tentatively stepping

into the realm of the Internet only magazine, with the National Magazine Company, for example, re-launching a celebrity gossip based web magazine, handbag.com, with facilities for readers to build their own groups in a way similar to social networking site MySpace.⁸ IPC's chief executive, Sylvia Auton, has also argued that the print magazine still has a good future for at least the next ten years, as most households still don't have broadband Internet access, and of those that don't, many are resistant to it (Auton cited in Robinson, 2007a: 10).

Others, however, believe that the difficulties for the women's magazine industry are structural, and that the Internet is therefore a major problem for the industry. Websites largely give their content away, and a site such as vogue.co.uk is only profitable because its content comes largely for free – from the magazine itself. The amount that advertisers expect to spend on buying space on the Internet is also low when compared to that spent on magazine space, and many predict they will stay low because Internet sites do not have scarcity value. If advertisers find the cost of advertising in an online magazine too high, they have a myriad of other appropriate sites they can go to in order to reach their target markets (Robinson, 2007a: 10).

But magazine publishers may also be missing something more fundamental about the future of women's magazines on the net. Whereas women tend to purchase or borrow a print edition of a women's magazine, and provide it with their exclusive or semi-exclusive attention, women literally trawl the net. Recent Ofcom data has also suggested that women are not predominantly attracted to websites that claim to be exclusively 'for women'. Indeed, women have a high presence on social networking sites such as Facebook, and on health and parenting websites. The BBC site is also popular with women, as is Google (and particularly Google Maps!) (Sabagh and Blakely, 2007: 31). Women from the upmarket spending group that the magazine industry so covets are also, undoubtedly, running online businesses, banking, ordering their weekly shop from the supermarket, and purchasing luxurious items such as holidays. Advertisers, therefore, have a welter of potential online advertising spaces through which to reach them, the majority of which are not in online magazine titles for women.

Conclusion

The changing depictions of working or 'New' women in the women's magazine industry of the 1980s and 1990s can be understood more clearly when we consider them in relation not only to feminist accounts of commercial culture, but also to a closer analysis of commercial practices. Far from 'foisting' magazines (whether they be print or online) on an unsuspecting 'market gap' of women, this paper has shown that where 'gaps' in the market are identified, the translation of this into a product that women will want to read is much more difficult. Instead, as I have argued here, the economic practices of magazine publishing can only be understood when we also think about them in terms of the cultural conditions in which they exist. The women's magazine industry has not found it easy to track the dispositions and aspirations of a desired target market of AB and C1 women. Instead, it has had to conduct consumer research, create more concrete images of women's lifestyles from this, sell this image to advertisers, formulate and re-formulate an editorial policy on an ongoing basis, and rely on the expertise of editorial staff to create a product that will 'speak' to the female consumer.

For the women's magazine industry, therefore, the lives of 'real' women *do* matter. As I

have shown with the example of *Working Woman*, women's magazines can, and frequently do, fail to attract readerships. Advertisers, too, can fail to see a magazine's potential, and the absence of their support from a magazine is the death knell for that title. Magazine editors are placed in a difficult position – that of trying to speak to 'real' women, and that of trying to convince advertisers that the women they describe are a viable commercial target group. The ways in which markets for women's magazines are formed, therefore, relate in some way to the real lives and experiences of women. However, how women's lives are depicted in 'lifestyle' magazines are clearly subject to a range of pressures that arise from the operations of commercial culture. Nevertheless, whilst the representations of femininities in the lifestyle magazines discussed here could suggest that the lives of British women have shifted away from more traditional forms of female identity that situated them wholly within the sphere of consumption, this is clearly not the case. As the femininities and consumption patterns of young, middle-class women continued to shift away from the traditional feminine scripts, women's monthly 'glossy' magazines of the 1980s and 1990s positioned themselves as 'guides' for how to achieve a 'new' form of 'stylish' femininity. By the early twenty-first century, however, young middle-class women were moving away from the monthly magazine towards the celebrity weekly, attracted by their 'dip in, dip out' formulas, and by their discourse of empowerment through consumption (see Feasey, 2006).

Overall, the consumer identities I have outlined here suggest a range of feminine scripts in which the spheres of consumption *and* production were significant. The women's magazine industry had shifted dramatically from targeting women as either 'domestic angels', or as 'young, free, single, and determined to attract an eligible bachelor'. The young, professional, middle-class woman evidently did not wish to be associated with a more traditional form of commercial identity as it did not accord with their own self-perceptions. What this suggested was that there were an increasing number of women for whom the sphere of 'production' had become integral to identity. It is arguable, but certainly possible, therefore, that the growth of women's magazines for this market is not explained entirely by the idea that it is an attempt of commerce to co-opt feminist politics and achievements for capitalist gain. Instead, we have seen that commercial culture has attempted to understand, and represent the identities of young, middle class women 'on the ground', and to situate their identities in the spheres of consumption *and* production.

At the time of writing, it does seem possible that the increased attachment of women to the Internet will result in the decline of the women's magazine for markets of working women in the ABC1 demographic group. Some magazine publishers are clearly attaching high hopes to being able to carve out niches for women online. Others argue that, at their best, magazine websites for women's magazines will be successful only if they are complementary to a top-selling print edition. Magazine websites may be interactive and immediate. But print magazines are easily portable, and can be read when women are travelling to work on public transport, for example. Moreover, magazine publishers have long known that the feel of the 'glossy paper', combined with sophisticated design and relevant editorial, are the main attraction of these magazines for their readerships. Call me 'old fashioned', but the combination of sensory experience, portability, and high quality design in the glossy print magazine are going to be impossible for publishers to replicate online. In a market for women that is crowded with media channels, glossy titles may well be reduced to niche publications. Yet, while the glossy magazine for the 'upmarket' woman may witness a decline, it will not, I would wager, die out entirely.

End Notes

1. I cannot outline the methodological frameworks of this study due to space restrictions, but a full discussion of the research process is outlined in Gough-Yates, 2003: 21-25
2. For more detailed analyses of *Cosmopolitan* see Winship, 1987; Ouellette, 1999; and Osgerby 2005
3. For a more detailed analysis of the rise and fall of *Working Woman* see Gough-Yates (2003: 87-94)
4. For a more in depth account of these launches see Gough-Yates (2003: 95-117).
5. Joke Hermes's (1995) analysis of the position of women's magazines in the lives of their readers argues that women's magazines may not actually be that important to the women who read them. Indeed in cases where magazines *are* important to readers, Hermes (1995: 41) observes that many 'give meaning to women's magazine genres in a way that a quite remarkable extent is independent of the women's magazine text'. Thus they may use women's magazines as tools for fantasizing about an 'ideal self, whilst never putting their content into practice.
6. This work was greatly influenced by the work of the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, and his account of the 'new petite bourgeoisie' (see Bourdieu, 1980).
7. For a more detailed account of this sociological work, see Gough-Yates, 2003: 121-131.
8. Handbag.com was originally launched in October 1999, and was bought by National Magazines for around 22 million pounds from the owners of the *Daily Telegraph*, Barclay Brothers.

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