A photograph of a woman from the chest down, wearing a sleeveless top covered in multi-colored sequins. She is holding a large, rectangular, brown leather clutch bag in front of her. The background is a warm, reddish-brown color.

Understanding Women's Magazines

Publishing, Markets and Readerships

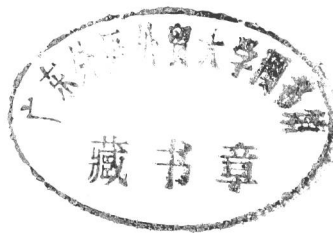
Anna Gough-Yates

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Publishing, markets and readerships

Anna Gough-Yates



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FOR MY GRANDMA, TEHIAY,
WITH LOVE

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WOMAN

THE NEW

**Does she want
to gain
££££££s?**

**Does she
think a nanny
less expensive
than a nervous
breakdown?**

**Can she
housetrain her
high-flying
husband?**

**Is she fit
(or fit
to drop)?**

**When she gives a dinner party does she cook?
Is she seriously glamorous or glamorously serious?**



Figure 1 'The New Woman', *The Times*, 23 May 1988 (copyright © Sian Frances/Times Newspapers Limited, London).

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INTRODUCTION

In May 1988, a picture of a women's magazine called *The New Woman* appeared in *The Times*. Like many other women's magazines of the period, a well-groomed, female model beamed cheerily out from its cover. Yet the rest of the magazine did not bear the hallmarks of a typical women's title. To begin with, the woman on the cover was wearing a business suit, and in her hand she held her credit card. Over her shoulder was slung – somewhat incongruously – a bulging sports bag. In the woman's arms was an over-sized, slightly grumpy, wriggling toddler. The cover lines were also unusual. 'Does she want to gain fffffffs?', they asked, and 'Is she seriously glamorous or glamorously serious?' 'Does she think a nanny less expensive than a nervous breakdown?', they wondered, or 'Can she housetrain her high-flying husband?' 'When she gives a dinner party does she cook?' 'Is she fit (or fit to drop)?' (Slaughter, 1988: 21).

The New Woman, of course, never actually appeared on newsagents' shelves. It was a spoof, existing only as an amusing illustration to accompany an article on the changing business of women's magazines. Nevertheless, although the magazine itself was a fiction, the image and sell-lines on the cover can be seen as bringing together many elements of the story of women's magazines in the late twentieth century that this book sets out to tell. As the accompanying article by ex-magazine editor Audrey Slaughter (1988: 21) observed, the women's magazine industry was trying to construct new readerships of women, but there was little agreement about how a 'New Woman' would want to be addressed. According to Slaughter, one new magazine imagined the 'New Woman' as '[s]harp, avid and with a short attention span', wanting a magazine that could provide her with 'information doled out like hormone implants', whilst 'keeping her fit and young while she copes efficiently with her career and her marriage' (Slaughter, 1988: 21). Another believed her to be 'a worrier', 'agonizing over whether she is being selfish if *her* preference, *her* television programmes, *her* wishes have priority, requiring reassurance that her needs are valid and important' (Slaughter, 1988: 21). A third magazine fancied the 'New Woman' as 'stylish, curious and anxious to understand what is going on beyond her immediate ken'

(Slaughter, 1988: 21). There was evidently much argument about the 'New Woman', and about what – if anything – she would want from a women's magazine. Indeed, perhaps the only agreement about her was that she was a component of a target market of 'nine million' middle-class women with 'up-market aspirations' (Slaughter, 1988: 21).

I argue in Chapters 4 and 5 that new forms of market research were central to the appearance of a 'New Woman' as a target market for women's magazines in the 1980s and 1990s. In the immediate post-war years, the women's magazine industry had used demographics to help them imagine and classify their readerships and to predict their consumption patterns. Demographics ranked women by social class based on the occupation of the (usually male) head of the household, and combined this data with other factors such as age and marital status. Thus, a classic demographic segmentation used by the magazine industry had been 'ABC1 housewives with children', and a classic magazine for this consumer market had been the domestic weekly title, *Woman*. From the late 1950s onwards, however, there had been some attempt by the women's magazine industry to shift away from demographics towards segmentation by 'attitude' (Winship, 1987: 46).

According to Janice Winship (1987: 46–7), the move of the women's magazine industry away from demographics was largely spurred on by their engagement with forms of 'motivational' market research. Through qualitative data produced by research into the behavioural psychology of consumers, a picture of a very diverse 'women's market' was constructed. This data also spurred on a number of attempts to produce magazines for a 'New Woman', who was believed to be distinguishable from the traditional mass-market 'housewife' through her broader range of life experiences and 'motivational distinctions' (see Nixon, 1996: 93). IPC's ill-fated *Nova* (1965–75) ('the new magazine for the new kind of woman') and *Candida* (1972), for example, along with National Magazines' more popular venture *Cosmopolitan* (1972–present), were all products of the magazine industry's attempts to identify the 'needs' and motivations of women consumers of the 1960s and early 1970s. By the late 1970s, however, 'motivational' research per se began to lose ground with some market researchers. It was replaced by 'lifestyle' segmentations produced through qualitative research techniques. Lifestyle research represented consumers as more diverse and changeable than ever before, and produced more individualistic images of them. Moreover, lifestyle research emphasized the differences between consumer groups in cultural, as well as economic and motivational terms (Nixon, 1996: 92–6). The take-up of these techniques by the women's magazine industry, I argue, helped to shape its representations of a 'New Woman' in glossy women's magazines from the mid-1980s onwards.

As I discuss in Chapter 1, the account developed in this book has been shaped in relation to a range of discourses about, and interpretations of, these new 'lifestyle' images of young, middle-class femininity. A plethora of

commentary and analysis about a 'New Woman' appeared within the magazine and advertising trade press of the 1980s and 1990s, and sometimes (as we have already seen) extended into the broadsheet newspapers. There was also a small amount of academic analysis of the significance of this 'New Woman'. In an account of women's magazines in the 1980s, Janice Winship (1987: 150) offered a reading of the 'New Woman' that saw her 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 maintained that the basis for these new magazines lay in the growing financial independence of middle-class women in their twenties and thirties. 'Not only is this group growing numerically', Winship (1987: 156) observed:

but the steady post-war rise of married women's employment and the effects of sixteen years of the women's movement have meant that these women tend to have personal spending money beyond the purely domestic sphere. If the High Streets in Britain have witnessed a crop of Next, Principles and Country Casuals shops springing up to provide for these 'mature' women's fashion needs, so too the magazine world has begun to look to her custom.

My account here partly pursues Winship's ideas. Indeed, in Chapters 2 and 7 it seeks to understand the significance of images of a 'New Woman' in relation to formations of middle-class femininities in the late twentieth century. Unlike Winship, however, I do not concern myself with exploring the contradictions between feminism and femininity in the pages of the magazines, or the possible 'effects' of the magazines on their readers. As I show in Chapter 1, such questions are important for the analysis of women's magazines, and have already received considerable attention – and produced much debate – within feminist magazine scholarship (see, for example, Ballaster *et al.*, 1991; Hermes, 1995; Winship, 1987). This book leans instead towards an exploration of discourses about a 'New Woman' in the spheres of production and circulation. It therefore explores how images of new markets of potential readers were discursively constructed by media professionals, including publishers, journalists and advertisers. Fundamental to this analysis, therefore, is a need to understand how a complex nexus of power relationships produced particular discourses about a 'New Woman', helping to define how femininity was thought about – and imagined – within women's magazine production. My methodological approach, and the reasoning behind it, are discussed in some detail in Chapter 1. But, readers should note here, that this book reflects less upon the 'language' of women's magazines themselves, and more upon the rise of a 'New Woman' as a subject for debate in the advertising, marketing and magazine industries, and particularly in their trade press. It is therefore in relation to the 'New Woman' as she was

represented within the discourse of media industries that I advance an argument about her cultural – and economic – significance. In Chapter 4 I detail the importance, in particular, of the advertising trade press of the mid-to late 1980s in promoting the figure of a ‘New Woman’. The remainder of the book charts the discursive formation of a ‘New Woman’ in the women’s magazine industry. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the elaboration and solidification of a ‘New Woman’ figure in the discourses of advertisers and magazine professionals from the mid-1980s and early 1990s. Chapter 7 explores the ‘New Woman’ as a space of projection for media professionals, and speculates on its function as a distinctive social space for some magazine readers. Chapter 8 considers more recent attempts to break away from a ‘New Woman’ as she was figured in the latter years of the twentieth century.

The historical specificity of the ‘New Woman’ as she was deployed by media professionals is, therefore, a central concern of this book. The story I tell here is best read as a cultural history of shifting discourses about a ‘New Woman’ as she was deployed by magazine and advertising professionals in the 1980s and 1990s. As I demonstrate in Chapter 3, these decades were particularly active for the magazine industry in the United Kingdom. In the late 1970s the magazine sector had faced many disheartening predictions of future demise in the face of increased commercial competition from new media. Yet, as Tony Weymouth and Bernard Lamizet (1996: 52) have observed, this view of the sector was mistaken. Indeed, the British magazine industry – in line with a European trend – experienced a period of significant expansion in these decades. Most notable here was a revitalization of the women’s magazine market. Whilst traditional domestic titles such as *Woman’s Own* had experienced a great decline in their sales figures, other magazines had appeared to take their place. Most conspicuous here were a range of monthly ‘glossy’ women’s titles – including *Elle* and *Marie Claire* – that had achieved high circulations amongst groups of young professional women (Weymouth and Lamizet, 1996: 52).

As I suggest in Chapter 8, women’s magazines of the twenty-first century continue to design new editorial mixes for women. Some magazines have attempted to break from the ‘New Woman’, as she was conceived and elaborated upon throughout the mid-1980s to the late 1990s. Indeed, they have tried to produce new images of femininity that are distinguished from those discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. The women’s magazine industry has not, however, tried to move away from targeting readerships of young, professional middle-class women. Yet, as Anne M. Cronin (2000: 51–3) has noted, ‘young’ is viewed by media industries as an increasingly ‘elastic’ category and many women’s magazines (for example, *Red* and *Eve*) now seek core readerships of women in their mid-thirties. Indeed, this suggests that some media professionals are seeking to devise new titles and editorial mixes to target many of the same women readers they sought in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

INTRODUCTION

This book is very concerned with the cultural shifts that had an impact on the formation of discourses about a 'New Woman' in the late twentieth century. Yet it also contends that there were economic and politically driven factors that helped produce these images of contemporary femininity. In the first part of Chapter 2, I explore debates about the 1980s in the UK: the 'enterprise culture' and its characteristic economic, political (and to a degree social and cultural) dynamics. I engage here, particularly, with a body of work that attempts to frame these shifts within a Fordist/post-Fordist paradigm. This examines the crisis of mass production and traces shifts towards a new economic era characterized by more flexible forms of manufacturing and new strategies of economic regulation. Chapter 3 also draws on the Fordist/post-Fordist model as a means for understanding transitions in the women's magazine industry of the 1980s and 1990s, and its emphasis on developing more flexible organizational forms and practices. The Fordist/post-Fordist paradigm remains central to the discussions of institutional practices throughout this book. I argue that the changes in the organization and practices of women's magazine and advertising production during the late twentieth century are related to this wider process of economic restructuring. Indeed, the development of cultures of flexibility within advertising – and subsequently the magazine industry – ultimately *facilitated* the introduction of more flexible techniques of production and organization, and the development of titles for a 'New Woman' within the women's magazine sector.

Whilst this analysis is sensitive to institutional practices and processes, it does not attempt to represent these in a 'deterministic' sense familiar in many studies of the 'political economy' of the media. In contrast, I adopt an analytical framework known in cultural studies as 'cultural economy', and view 'economic' activities as profoundly 'cultural' phenomena (see du Gay, 1997a; du Gay and Pryke, 2002). One consequence of this approach is that I view the processes of production and systems of organization of the magazine and advertising industries as discursive. These industries carry meanings about how such sites should be thought about and responded to by others. Similarly, I do not view the organizational structures of these industries as forms that are simply 'inhabited' by those within. As is particularly evident in my discussion of magazine editors as cultural intermediaries in Chapter 7, working practices are profoundly 'cultural' practices – carrying particular meanings and constructing certain forms of action amongst people subjected to them. Chapter 1 of this book discusses in more detail the conceptual frameworks and research model I have adopted in this study – and their inevitable limitations. It also explains, however, ways in which this study can open up a new and challenging way for 'understanding' women's magazines and other cultural industries, and for considering the processes of cultural production, circulation and consumption in the modern world.

UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S MAGAZINES

How can we 'understand' women's magazines? Previous scholars in this field have offered contrasting accounts of how women's magazines might be 'understood', and how they should be studied. Many have focused on women's magazines at a textual level, and analysed them for their ideological content. Others have argued that women's magazines can be understood by exploring the ways in which their readers consume them. A few studies have maintained that women's magazines are best approached through an analysis of their conditions of production. In this chapter I explore and unpack these various approaches, clarifying exactly what is at stake when we talk about 'understanding' women's magazines.

A survey of existing research both alerts us to some of the complexities involved in the study of women's magazines and highlights the variety of ways in which the field has been accorded significance within the social sciences. A review of earlier scholarly work also allows the context and concerns of the present study to be mapped out. In outlining the nature and implications of earlier studies, this chapter explores the ways in which women's magazine research could benefit from a re-evaluation of its methods of cultural analysis. In particular, I argue for an account of women's magazines that gives close attention to the ways their meanings are produced and circulated at 'economic' sites. I am especially concerned with how practitioners in the women's magazine industry (together with those working in the closely allied fields of advertising and marketing) understand, represent and relate to their product. I explore the ways in which these conditions of existence impact upon the management and organization of the magazine industry, the way they influence the relationships between women's magazines, advertisers and marketers, and the way they ultimately shape the character of the magazines that appear on the newsagents' shelves. Rather than being the exclusive province of economic imperatives, therefore, I argue that the business of women's magazine production should also be seen as a *cultural* realm. Yes, it is a commercially led, market-oriented industry. But one that depends heavily on *social* and *cultural* processes for its effective operation.

As will become evident, while I emphasize issues of methodology in this

chapter, I acknowledge that the research model I ultimately adopted for this study has inevitable limitations. The strength of the analysis lies, however, in the attention it gives to the economic and social facets of the business of magazine production – areas almost entirely ignored in previous studies of women's magazines, where textual analysis has tended to be prioritized over issues of production and industry organization. In doing so, existing scholarship has, I argue, disregarded aspects in the 'life' of women's magazines that are crucially important in the generation and circulation of their meanings. This chapter, therefore, outlines existing work in the field of women's magazines and explains how my own study of a particularly important moment in their development – the 1980s and 1990s – opens up new and challenging ways for 'understanding' these texts' production, circulation and consumption.

Women's magazines, feminism and ideology

Studies of women's magazines have been conducted largely by feminist media scholars. As Joke Hermes (1997: 223) has pointed out, such studies have invariably configured these texts as a 'problem' for women. Whilst the work of feminist media critics has diverse disciplinary origins, the majority have argued that the media contribute to the reinforcement of gender differences and inequalities in contemporary societies. From this perspective, media representations are seen as a key site through which oppressive feminine identities are constructed and disseminated. In these terms those working in media production are seen as conspiring in the promotion of both capitalism and patriarchy. Classically, then, feminist critiques of the media industries portray them as ideologically manipulative – and the role of the critic is seen as highlighting and challenging their system of domination.

Such assumptions about the manipulative role of media producers are evident in most studies of women's magazines. The women's magazine industry is understood as a monolithic meaning-producer, circulating magazines that contain 'messages' and 'signs' about the nature of femininity that serve to promote and legitimate dominant interests. This book argues that such accounts of women's magazines offer, at best, only a partial account of the industry. In particular, I contend that 'classic' feminist perspectives tend to neglect the ways in which cultural production involves, as Richard Johnson puts it, 'raw materials, tools or means of production, and socially-organized forms of human labour' (1986/7: 99). Many feminist accounts of women's magazines, I argue, overlook these vital issues. Existing perspectives effectively marginalize the specificities of social, political and economic formations and their impact upon not only women's magazine production, but also the lived cultures of the magazine producers themselves. Taking the text itself as the key point of analysis, existing scholarship has hitherto ignored the roles of *producers* in using (and transforming) discursive and ideological elements within the development of women's magazines.

Early feminist accounts of women's magazines (and their interpretation of the relationship between the texts and their readers' self-perception) were concerned with the ways that magazines offered 'unreal', 'untruthful' or 'distorted' images of women. These studies, therefore, called for more 'positive' images of women, ones that were more in line with the ethos and ideals of the feminist movement. Betty Friedan (1963) and Tuchman *et al.* (1978), for example, both offered seminal accounts of women's magazines that viewed the texts as highly problematic for feminism. From this perspective, women's magazines were seen as a powerful force for the construction and legitimation of gender inequalities. In these terms, women's magazines did not simply offer their readers innocent pleasure – they were a key site for the development of a self-identity that undermined women's essential, 'real' feminine identities. Both Friedan and Tuchman presented women's magazines as pernicious and alienating, as texts that worked to estrange and separate women from both one another and from their 'true' selves. The media (and implicitly those involved in their production), therefore, were presented as a 'problem' for the women's movement – a 'problem' to which Friedan and Tuchman offered similar solutions. Both authors concluded their studies by advocating the 'liberation' of women's magazine readerships through the 'enlightening' force of feminism. And this, they hoped, would ultimately sweep away the women's magazine in its contemporary (and lamentably patriarchal) form.

The late 1970s saw a shift away from conceiving women's magazines simply in terms of their 'negative' or 'positive' images of women. Instead, moving beyond the liberal feminist perspectives advanced by Friedan and Tuchman, many critics found a more sophisticated theoretical model in the work of the neo-Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser (1970). Influenced by Althusser's challenging reworking of the Marxist notion of ideology, many feminist authors began to suggest that the representations of women prevalently offered in women's magazines were not simply 'ideological' chimera, but had repercussions in women's lives that were both concrete and material.

The significance of Althusser's work lies in his insistence that ideology is not just a set of illusory ideas, or a form of mental state or consciousness. Instead, he understands ideology as having material form, existing as something that is carried out by groups and institutions in society. In order for ideology to be effective, Althusser argues, the people living this imaginary relation to the real conditions of existence must engage in rituals and practices. These, he contends, are ideologically inscribed into the 'Ideological State Apparatuses' (ISAs) of society. These institutions work to form people as subjects of ideology. They also ensure that people place (and understand) themselves in terms of ideological frameworks. Feminist media critics who employed Althusser's model in their analyses of women's magazines believed that women would recognize themselves in terms of the ideological frameworks generated within the texts (see Glazer, 1980; Leman, 1980; Winship,