

# THE GLOSS

## *Wears Off*

*In the booming 80s, women's magazines bloomed on the news stands. Now the freeze has come. Jennifer Craik looks at the winners and the losers, and what it suggests about the 'new traditionalist' trend.*

**T**he sky seemed the limit for women's magazines in Australia. New titles jostled with one another in an apparently unlimited market. The newcomers were absorbed without difficulty.

Australian women buy more magazines per head than any other nation in the world. It seems that women do not switch magazines, but simply add a new title to their shopping list. On average, one in five Australian women buys one or more magazines per month, compared with sales of one magazine for every sixteen to twenty women in other countries.

But, since 1989, magazines have been struggling to survive. With so many new titles, the advertising dollar has been spread thinly and the recession has reduced revenue significantly. On top of that, readership has been declining—about 30% across magazines. Some magazines, notably *Harpers Bazaar*, have gone to the wall while others are seeking new gimmicks to survive. The lifestyle magazine, *Tempo*, recently did a deal with *The Australian* to appear at

three-monthly intervals as a freebie with the paper, thereby boosting its circulation from 25,000 to 85,000.

In the case of women's magazines, some have fared better than others. Business analyst, Neil Shoebridge, has suggested that the fashion magazines have been worst hit although *Family Circle*, *Cleo* and *Dolly* have also experienced declining sales. There is now a greater differentiation between titles and readerships. Women have endorsed the trend to niche marketing by becoming more selective in their buying habits and trying out new titles. Clearly, the broadening of ways to address women has been successful in market terms. However, the potential of niche magazines out of desk top publishing may be circumscribed by the stranglehold of the big two publishers over the magazine market as a whole.

But have women readers benefited from the expansion of the market and what will be the consequences of the current shake-out among women's magazines?

Service magazines such as *Women's Weekly* and *New Ideas* have been the winners in the market stakes but at the cost



of content. Most still address women in fairly conventional terms (concerning home life, personal growth and self-presentation) though many of the service functions (advice, home hints, crafts, human interest stories, fiction) have been partially sacrificed for a focus on stars, royalty and glamour. This change may be a result of the new magazines on the market which address issues, controversies and less conventional topics.

How women readers have reacted to these changes is unclear. On the one hand, it is easy to criticise service magazines for offering limited options for women constructing a limited set of role models and catering for a limited range of interests—from homemaking tips to escapist fiction and human interest stories. On the other hand, such magazines also raise more complex issues and occasionally profile successful or unusual women.

Readers may be highly selective in choosing what they read and whether they believe it. Moreover, much of the pleasure of magazines lies in the sheer anticipation and in the act of reading. As Judith Williamson wrote about the process of writing her book *Decoding Advertisements*: "As a teenager, reading both Karl Marx and *Honey* magazine, I couldn't reconcile what I knew with what I felt. This is the root of ideology, I believe. I knew I was being 'exploited', but it was a fact that I was attracted."

Ien Ang has noted a similar phenomenon in her book, *Watching Dallas*. Many of her respondents were leftwing, professional women who were hooked on the television soap despite their 'ideological' beliefs and lifestyles. One

defended her devotion on the grounds that "*Dallas* is just so tremendously exaggerated, it has nothing to do with capitalists any more, it's just sheer artistry to make up such nonsense". Responses like these suggest that women are not passive consumers but actively negotiate popular media texts.

American feminist Betty Friedan recently commented in the new beauty magazine *Allure* that she "was very grateful for the support of Helen Gurley Brown in our early battles for equality. I enjoyed having that sexy *Cosmopolitan* Girl say that she loved her sports car and her new Chanel suit, but any man who wanted to attract her had to be for the ERA". She argues that women have developed an "autonomous, independent attitude towards fashion and beauty" and are not passive victims of the sexual sell. In other words, women use popular texts in complex ways which resist the overt messages of persuasion and exploitation.

While there has been some recognition of the escapist (cathartic?) function of soaps and romance literature, there has been less research on the ambivalent role of women's magazines. Reading may fulfil monitoring, voyeuristic and normative functions as well as simply being fun. Many women, especially working women, consume magazines as 'time out' from demanding schedules and workaday pressures. Magazines allow them to escape and vicariously enjoy the idea of handicrafts, cooking, fashion, looking good, and so on, compensating for not having the time to make and do such things. Whatever the interpretation of the reading habits of women's magazines, sales have

boomed. Clearly many women reconcile their conflicting attitudes with their compulsion to read such material.

Cynthia White, in her classic study, *Women's Magazines 1963-1968* (p 299), argued that women's magazines construct a special place for women:

Turning the first page of a mass weekly is like entering a women's club—a woman knows she is on "home ground" ... This is her territory, her profession; she knows the rules and she shares the implicit goals and values. Here she finds warmth, friendship and identification, as well as a little harmless escapism. There is colour, humour and vitality to raise her spirits, and often a money-saving offer to give a fillip to her wardrobe. Over the years a special relationship can grow up between readers and their magazines, a strong bond compounded of trust, loyalty—and habit.

Revelling in this utopia, magazines have commissioned market research which pointed to some surefire roads to establish a readership. The biggest single drawcard is the use of role models with whom readers can identify. In the 80s, the most successful image was the 'DI factor'. A photograph of the Princess of Wales (incumbent, manufactured or exiled) is generally a good seller.

So, too, are well-known models and stars of television, cinema and popular music. For example, *Cleo* has frequently and successfully used expatriate model Elle MacPherson on its cover to epitomise the ideal *Cleo* woman. Each magazine has learned to choose its cover subjects carefully since the age and interests of specific readerships determine which face will boost sales of a particular title.

While the cover may attract buyers, there is evidence which suggests that women are increasingly dissatisfied with the content of many women's magazines. The main complaint is that women's magazines lack substance and engagement with women's lives while emphasising ideals and fantasies. Yet it is not clear what women readers do want—or rather are prepared to buy. On the one hand, magazines which have tried to recapture the traditional qualities of service magazines have failed, but at the same time, those which have adopted a more progressive tack have had decidedly mixed fortunes.

Epitomising the revival of the traditional approach were *Savvy* and *Now*. Both launched in 1990, they lasted just three and four months respectively. Both were committed to endorsing traditional values "cooking, sewing and crafts, but with a very modern perspective". *Savvy*, published by Murdoch, was aimed at young women (18 to 35) pursuing "normal" lives who had been "left a little lost by the turbulent and aggressive 1980s and the pursuit of material gain and career at all costs". Valerie Lawson has suggested that *Savvy* was a throwback to Lord Northcliffe's "women's pages" which mixed fashion, self-improvement and household tips. Despite "widespread industry opinion" that there was a market gap for such a magazine, it failed, purportedly because it "had just been too boring". Now was a similar venture by Century Magazines aimed at a

younger audience but it, too, failed to raise any interest (even after slashing the price by half).

Friedan accounts for "the new traditionalism" as part of a backlash against the new independence of women. Accordingly, magazines imply "that women are giving up careers when just the opposite is true". Few women can afford not to work now. It may be this disjunction between the myth and reality that explains the failure of such magazines.

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In contrast, other magazines have adopted a progressive format to attract "women who were not readers of women's magazines". The editor of *HQ*, Shona Martyn, has characterised its target market as "thinking women 28 and over" who were "dissatisfied with magazines on the market". It is the only popular magazine on the market with an overtly feminist slant. Published by ACP, *HQ* developed out of the tired institution *Good Housekeeping*. It initially contracted the name to the initials, GH, and subsequently launched the new initials in the hope of cementing a new readership for the revamped magazine. Concentrating on articles that present "real" issues in a magazine that could be read and not just leafed through, *HQ* has attracted a small band of devotees, female and male. Although Martyn and publisher Richard Walsh believe that *HQ* is the kind of magazine that will become the norm of the 90s, its readership remains modest.

Two magazines launched within months of each other in 1989 also reflected a new approach to how women's magazines should relate to the texture of women's lives. Capricorn Press's *Ita* borrowed the marketing slogan of the American *Lear's*, namely an appeal to "women who weren't born yesterday". *Ita* was aimed at women who were articulate, probably in a well-paid career, possessing a comfortable standard of living and knowledgeable about the finer things in life. As a magazine, *Ita* balances entertainment, information and advertising relevant to its readership as well as exploring less glamorous issues (eg, the consequences of breast cancer for men). Despite its specific appeal to a reasonably small group of women, *Ita* has established an impressive market reach without the massive expenditure of other titles.

Similar in format but not so up-market or ambitious in scope, Murdoch's *New Woman* has also sought to tap into the busy schedule of working women and homemakers. Its message, however, is quite schizophrenic, juxtaposing articles on coping with the demands on the new woman, with others justifying women who want to escape work

pressures and stay at home. Much of its content concerns personal relationships (your man, his mother), sexuality and sensuality, dieting, fashion and role models. The American edition has been one of Friedan's targets. The Australian edition achieved phenomenal success at first, steadying to a respectable niche readership.

The most distinctive niche magazine, *Portfolio*, launched in 1984 by Mason Stewart Publishing, sought "to be in the vanguard for women who are just as unique as their magazine of choice", said former editor, Christine Hogan. Aimed at ambitious career women, it covers issues concerning work, finances, longterm planning, leisure and lifestyle, as well as fostering a particular genre of career clothing for professional women. In 1990, a slump in sales saw it put up for sale but, in the absence of a buyer, it has gone bi-monthly and its editorship has been assumed by Alexandra Joel, the publisher's wife, in an attempt to give the magazine a new gloss. Already *Portfolio* enjoys the most affluent reader profile of women's magazines.

The new *Portfolio*, the May/June issue, featured evergreen Candice Bergen on its cover, seeks the women of the 90s. Joel calls her "the juggler", the woman who is attempting to balance the often conflicting demands of career, children, personal interests and leisure pursuits, not to mention trying to keep the odd relationship afloat while, at the same time, struggling to preserve a modicum of sanity and some semblance of having a good time!

Of all the newcomers, it has been the Australian edition of *Elle* which has prospered at the expense of other magazines. *Elle's* assault on the down-under-market was well planned and well publicised. Published by ACP under licence from Hachette Publications, *Elle* had the Australian women's magazine market jittering a year before it hit the streets. Its selling point was its freshness compared with the perceived staidness of *Vogue*: *Elle* is "newer, it's international, it's more modern", said editor Debbie Coffey. Focusing on fashion, *Elle* cashes in on its French origins and implicit connections with trend-setting Paris which still dominates fashion myth if not reality. The "*Elle* look" is "le total look"—"slick, tres chic and terribly 'in'". So far as *Elle* is concerned with lifestyle, it emphasises "good" news designed to make readers "happy".

This is a long way from *Elle's* origins as a radical postwar Parisian magazine that is reputed to have revolutionised the marketing of fashion (from the elite to the masses on both sides of the Atlantic), broke the rules of fashion photography, supported the 1968 student uprising, organised the first International Women's General Assembly at Versailles in 1968 and employed Francois Giroud who went on to become France's first Minister for Women in 1974. *Elle* has expanded from Paris to editions in 17 countries.

Despite—perhaps because of—attempts to blend its international context with Australian fashion, interests and lifestyle, *Elle Australia* is an unremarkable magazine, much less interesting than its sisters which still sell well in

Australia. Nonetheless, it has achieved a good grip on the market, forcing a significant slump in sales of *Mode* and, to a lesser extent, *Vogue*. Industry analysts suggest that a fierce war is going on between the three magazines as they fight to retain readership during this shakeout period.

Perhaps the most symptomatic lesson about the recent changes in women's magazines can be gleaned from the internal politics of *New Woman*. Somewhat in conflict with its promotion of new lifestyles and careerism of women, the publishers of *New Woman* replaced its editor, Julia Zaetta, while she was taking maternity leave. This episode does not augur well for the "jugglers" of the 90s. If it is indicative of the politics of publishing, readers hoping for new perceptions of women to be genuinely articulated in women's magazines will be disappointed.

And yet, Friedan has noted that women's magazines today present a "much more progressive" world than 25 years ago:

There is a much greater diversity of women in those pages—black, Asian and Hispanic. And the advice they give out implies autonomy, independence, and a lack of complete credulity or passivity on the reader's part. There's a complex richness to women's culture today that is a beautiful mix of feminism and femininity.

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She has suggested that women "are trapped halfway on the road to full empowerment" and wouldn't be "suckers...if they were sure enough of the good possibilities for their own lives as women" and hence in a position to define their own ideals, strategies and life chances. White (p 288) has observed that the history of women's magazines shows that those which "show initiative and high editorial quality can succeed even where a market is reputedly saturated". In short, women's magazines would seem—in the words of that famous cigarette commercial—to have come a long way, but the messages are still contradictory and the dominant rhetoric conservative. Still, with more magazines on the market, maybe there is some hope that they will respond more rapidly to the changing circumstances of women's lives and reflect the greater range of options for women.

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