

Women's Magazines in the 1970s

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Les changements survenus aux revues traditionnelles pour les femmes causés par le mouvement de la femme pendant les années 70 sont plutôt cosmétiques que profonds. Quoiqu'il existe un grand nombre de petites revues et de journaux canadiens et américains, ils subsistent à peine au moyen de budgets minuscules et avec un tirage limité.

The impact of the Women's Movement on women's magazines in the 1970s should have been profound. Women's magazines have traditionally reflected 'lifestyles' and the lifestyles of women in the 1970s changed quite drastically. But the changes in traditional magazines were cosmetic rather than basic. There were a number of reasons—not the least of which was the multi-million dollar advertising investment in women's magazines.

From the first, women's magazines—*Godey's Ladies' Book*, *Glass of Fashion*, *Home Arts*—took on the form that was to shape them. They were cheerful, chatty, how-to-do-it collections of information on etiquette, fashion, home crafts and cooking. Men's magazines have always been more specialized. There were magazines devoted to politics, magazines devoted to business, literary magazines.

By the 1950s and 1960s women's magazines in Europe and North America were still carrying on in their well established, highly profitable tradition. The *Ladies Home Journal*, the front runner in North America, catered to the middle-class woman who was perceived as a homemaker, concerned with running a house, children, pleasing a husband and dabbling in hobbies and some good works. Men's magazines by this time covered a wide range of reading material. There were magazines devoted to specialized trades, general interest, picture magazines, as well as magazines on politics and business. Many of these 'men's' magazines were also widely read by women. But the editorial, in content and in personnel, was dominated by men and aimed at men, as, of course, was the advertising. Because men had more disposable income than women there were magazines aimed at well-to-do men with leisure. *Esquire*, with its



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calendar cuties, racy cartoons, fiction and articles was typical. The equivalents for well-to-do women were high fashion and beauty magazines. Any leisure women had—and any spare cash—would presumably be devoted to making themselves more attractive for men.

There were also pulp fiction magazines aimed at both sexes—Harlequin-style romance for women, relentlessly womanless, tough-guy, adventure, western and detective stories for men.

Women's magazines still were multi-functional with a smorgasbord of fashion, beauty, child care, hobbies, information and escape, all in one publication. From time to time various attempts to fine-tune the formula were made. In the 1950s *McCall's* pushed the 'togetherness' theme, which meant the magazine was aimed at couples, but the idea was dropped as unsuccessful. Later on an attempt to turn *McCall's* into a general magazine for women (with much less emphasis on service), under the prestigious writer, Shana Alexander, was disastrous. In the middle 1960s a unisex magazine in Germany called *Jasmin* was tried—and failed. *Nova*, a brilliant, witty glossy British effort, briefly blazed up brightly, then faded and finally died in International Women's Year in 1975.

Meanwhile Helen Gurley Brown took over a faltering *Cosmopolitan* in 1965 and transformed it into an international financial success story. The theme was simple—

it explained in endless variations how to please a man—and catch one.

Canadian magazines followed the standard formula. But Canadian magazines of any kind had a special problem. Since the middle of the 1930s, the two most successful magazines in the world—*Time* and *Reader's Digest*—had been competing in Canada as home-grown publications. They imported all of their editorial material free from the U.S., added a few 'Canadian' pages, stripped out their U.S. advertising and replaced it with Canadian advertising. This highly damaging and unfair practice for Canadian magazines was unique to Canada. No other country in the world had allowed such a wholesale rape of its periodical press. Canadian magazines died off like whooping cranes. A high mortality rate is natural in any healthy magazine business, but in the case of Canada, magazines that had once been well established died and were never replaced. In 1975, Bill C58 attempted to take away the special privileges of *Time* and *Reader's Digest*, but *Reader's Digest* was exempted and *Time* continues to run Canadian advertising without any Canadian editorial. However, even this relatively ineffective legislation has helped Canadian magazines enormously.

By 1958, in the women's magazine field in Canada, *National Home Monthly*, *Mayfair*, *Canadian Home Journal* had all faded and only *Chatelaine* remained. All through the 1960s, *Chatelaine* struggled

to survive. One survival tactic was to publish a more varied range of articles than might have been the case if there had been a spectrum of women's magazines in Canada. We ran articles on education, the prison system, the welfare state, the preservation of Canadiana and ecology. I also felt that although women in Canada were well educated, few of them were participating as fully as they should be in Canadian life, and we ran articles on the need for reform of the divorce law, the need for legal abortion, the inequality of pay for men and women in Canadian society and the tiny proportion of women in the professions and in our political system. We also ran articles back in the 1960s called 'The Real Poor in Canada are Women'—about welfare mothers and older women (a subject I am still very much concerned with and still writing and talking about today).

In fact, in 1963, a set of galleys was shipped to *Chatelaine* from New York. I passed it over to my managing editor, Jean Wright, and asked her to look it over for a possible excerpt. She passed it back to me with the comment, 'Nothing new here. We've run most of this stuff in *Chatelaine*.' I glanced over the galleys and agreed with her, and sent them back to the New York publisher. In that act I probably made the biggest mistake in magazine publishing. The book was *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, and, of course, it went on to become a world bestseller. But *Chatelaine* had published feminist articles all through the Sixties. In fact *Chatelaine* was far more advanced and 'radical' than any of the large U.S. magazines.

But even during the 1960s, in spite of articles in *Chatelaine* calling for more day nurseries, better part-time work, retraining for women returning to the work force, and a steady stream of articles urging women to aim higher—equality in pay, top jobs, power positions in politics—a large part of *Chatelaine* was quite traditional. We continued to run '16 ways with hamburger' and '14 New Summer Hair-do's' and articles on how to try to achieve happier marriages and be better mothers and, of course, articles on the royal family.

In fact, now that I look back on the 1960s, I feel *Chatelaine* was a kind of closet feminist magazine. We had to be. We had a circulation of over a million women—the equivalent of 16 million in the U.S. (the top woman's magazine there was *Ladies Home Journal*, with a circulation of 7 million). *Chatelaine* had to appeal to all women in Canada. We also

were frequently reminded through letters, of our middle-class, traditional audience. I was accused of 'breaking up the family.' For two years after we ran the first article urging that abortion be made legal in 1960, I was the target of a threatening letter-writing campaign aimed at closing the magazine and having me fired.

But with the advent of the Women's Movement and the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, *Chatelaine* could be much more open in its feminism. In fact, by this time, we were getting letters from women suggesting that we were too conservative and not feminist enough!

The only real departure in a glossy large circulation magazine from the traditional women's magazine has been *Ms*. Entirely run by women, it still thrives. However its circulation has not risen as fast as, for example, *Cosmopolitan's* did in the mid 1960s, or even as quickly as another alternative lifestyle magazine, *Harrowsmith*, in Canada in the 1970s.

But *Ms*. has shattered a number of other precedents. Advertising sales personnel had traditionally been male in the women's magazine field. When I used to complain about this—and I frequently did—I was always told there were no women experienced enough to sell ads on *Chatelaine*. *Ms*. took saleswomen from wherever they could find them, and they soon proved to be so competent at selling that they were lured away by other magazines.

Because many women were dissatisfied with traditional magazines with their slant toward revenue-producing advertising pages, several alternative feminist publications were started in the 1960s and 1970s. *Branching Out*, *Status of Women News*, *Kinesis*, *Upstream*, *Room of One's Own*, *Spare Rib*, *Makara* and *Broadside* are good examples. But all of these magazines are published with great dedication and no financial recompense for the editors and writers. All of them are understaffed and because there are virtually no advertising pages, they are underfinanced and have no money to build circulation.

The whole magazine world has changed in the last twenty years—not just because of the Women's Movement, but because of television and the explosion of the book publishing industry. The old style pulp magazines died. Magazines became more specialized—a casual stroll to any magazine counter will prove what I mean. There are dozens of magazines devoted to photography, skiing, cars, cycling, jogging, and of course, cooking, decorating and beauty. The general 'men's' magazines—*Collier's*, *Saturday Evening Post*, the old

Maclean's have disappeared. But the traditional women's magazines continue to flourish. They have changed, but essentially they are still 'service' magazines, catering as they have always done, to the many practical needs of the average woman.

Today they tell women how to manage their money, run for election, do their own divorce, get a promotion, cope with another woman's children, whomp up a gourmet (or natural food) meal in twenty minutes, keep in shape and make Christmas decorations.

In Canada we now have five women's magazines. There is *Chatelaine* in French and English. *Homemaker's* is a very good digest-sized magazine that is given away free to a select circulation. *Miss Chatelaine* was aimed at the teenage market until recently, when it was renamed *Flare* and now is edited for young career and university women from eighteen to thirty-five. *City Woman*, the most recent addition to the women's magazine field in Canada, is aimed at higher income women in urban centres and is given away in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver.

Advertisers don't want rural readers nor are they interested in older women. Although there are over a million women over the age of 65 in Canada, to read most of the Canadian women's magazines, one would think all Canadian women died at the age of thirty-five. Advertisers want trendy young couples with two incomes who live in fashionable town houses or high rises and, in spite of the fact that good editors know and struggle to run relevant material, the magazines reflect this highly fictitious lifestyle.

However, women's magazines are still far more nitty-gritty than the never-never land of men's escape and leisure magazines. In adventure magazines, macho men thrash around in jungles where women hardly exist. In pornographic magazines women are depicted and horribly degraded as mindless sex objects. The editorial content of these magazines suggests that every man in North America lives in a penthouse filled with expensive stereo equipment, fine old whisky and nude nymphets.

Women's magazines will really become liberated when they no longer have to devote so many pages to 'service' editorial in order to attract supporting advertising in food, fashion and beauty products.

Men's magazines will be 'liberated' when we see magazines with titles such as 'How to be a Better Lover,' 'How to Share the Crud Jobs Evenly,' 'The Art of Fathering' and 'How to Help *Her* Succeed at *Her* Job.'