

DISCOVERING MAGAZINES: THE SCHOLARLY MEANDERINGS OF AN ACCIDENTAL MAGAZINE SCHOLAR

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I turned 63 this week and my route to academia, let alone Magazine Studies, has been a long and circuitous one. Given my brief with this essay, I'm not sure it is wise to admit this, but I've never been a recreational reader of print magazines. There, I've said it. It has always been books and newspapers, for me. Perhaps for a few brief months when I was an early teenager reading Australia's *Dolly* magazine, I was attracted to the shiny allure of a glossy magazine, but I never became one of those cradle-to-grave magazine readers who (in Australia) were expected to move from *Dolly* to *Cleo* and from *Cleo* to the *Women's Weekly* and a parenting, gardening or home decorating magazine or two. Women were then meant to fill their twilight years with titles like *That's Life* where, at my age, it would have been assumed that I was long retired (if I'd worked outside of the home at all) and that I'd be interested in puzzles (true) or stories about husbands, grandchildren and puppies (not so much). It's a sign of the times that I listen to American political podcasts when walking to work and then, rather than sitting down with a pen and hard-copy magazine at night, I turn to my tablet or phone to complete Wordle, Connections, Strands, the Mini and then Spelling Bee (drivers beware, I often start working on them at traffic lights as I walk home in the evening).

As Joke Hermes explains in *Reading Women's Magazines* thirty years ago, part of the appeal of magazines is that, as everyday media, they can be picked up and put down and are typically not read back-to-back in a sitting or indeed in a linear fashion at all (1995). In the moments when we might have reached for a magazine in the past, of course, it's old news now that we reach for our mobile devices. Whether it is breaking news about tariff wars, wars in the Middle East, or the latest celebrity break up, we want to know about it *right now* and often while we are on the move. That is part of the problem for Australian print magazines but part of the success stories for titles like *The New York Times* (NYT) who have managed the shift from print to digital and from a national to an international audience so successfully. Although the NYT

is technically what we would have called a newspaper, a lot of its appeal is 'magazine style' content: puzzles, cooking, celebrities, product reviews, real estate, entertainment and culture. Readers now expect and indeed demand that material in digital form and it comes from a 'newspaper' that also includes videos, podcasts, and shared subscriptions. Rather than passing on a print magazine from person to person, we swap recipes, stories, and compete with each other to solve Connections on our devices. As researchers working in magazine studies, we understand how readership patterns have shifted and how the very definition of a 'magazine' is a dynamic one no matter how we might try to tie it down.

If I'm not a recreational magazine reader, why, then, have I just finished writing my second book about magazines? The answer is (of course) that magazines are fascinating objects of study. They capture the zeitgeist and that makes them invaluable texts to learn more about social history—gender, power, fashion and popular culture. Unlike many other distinguished magazine studies scholars like Marjorie Ferguson, David Abrahamson, Tim Holmes, Megan Le Masurier or Sharon Maxwell Magnus, I didn't start my professional life as a journalist. My undergraduate studies were varied but I eventually specialised in literary studies. My PhD was meant to be about Australian literature but ended up being about Australian film (search my name and *Mad Max* or *The Cars that Ate Paris*) and then over twenty years ago now I was fortunate to secure a position in the Department of English at the University of Sydney, Australia (now the Discipline of English and Writing). I then, happily, stumbled into Magazine Studies quite by chance.

I've taught many subjects here at Sydney University, but over twenty years ago a retiring Chair of Australian Literature, Professor Elizabeth Webby, designed a postgraduate unit of study about Australian Print Culture (chiefly colonial titles and little magazines) and, as these things happen, she soon retired, and I took on the unit and made it my own. My

interests remained in gender and popular culture, and I continued to write about gender and Australian film and so the unit soon morphed into a study of twentieth century and early twenty-first century magazine titles. We always started with the question 'what is a magazine?' (usefully guided by Le Masurier, 2014, on that topic) and my slides each semester tracked the Wikipedia entry for 'magazine' and showed how that definition was shifting every year. We looked at early second-wave feminist attacks on magazines (for example, Friedan, 1963 and Wolf, 1990) and then talked through second, third, and post-feminist approaches to femininity, magazines and consumption (Hanigsberg, 1997 and many others).

We looked at a range of Australian magazines from *Dolly* and *Girlfriend* to *Frankie* and *House & Garden* and enjoyed looking at everything from lads' magazines to surfing, fitness, decorating, quilting, fashion and wedding titles. When Apple smart phones were launched in 2007 and then iPads in 2010, we speculated whether screens could ever replace the tactile appeal of a glossy and how we might navigate digital content. We read papers by Dennis (2004), Abrahamson (2009) and others about the future of magazines and made our own predictions. Each semester, students gave papers about iconic Australian magazine editors, and we tracked sales and readership figures online and debated which titles would thrive and survive and which ones looked likely to wither and die. Would we, as the interviewees in Brita Ytre-Are's study (2011) declared, still want to hold magazines in our hands? In the early 2000s, two titles usually competed for the top spot: *The Australian Women's Weekly* (launched in 1933 and a monthly since December 1982) and *Better Homes & Gardens*. A quick check on Roy Morgan Research in early June 2026 confirms that that is still the case all these years later, with *Better Homes & Gardens* now comfortably in the lead.¹ What the Roy Morgan figures also illustrate is that free 'custom' or

'customer' magazines (that are essentially brand promotions) have vastly higher readerships than commercial magazines available for purchase.

I began to publish academic papers about magazines and co-edited a special issue of Australian journal *TEXT* in 2014 along with another Australian magazine scholar, Rose Williamson. My colleague Megan Le Masurier and I wrote about teaching Magazine Studies in that *TEXT* special issue (2014).² In another co-written piece, this time with Frances Di Lauro (2017), I discussed innovative Magazine Studies assessment tasks like asking students to write Wikipedia entries about Australian magazine editors. I was discovering just how broad and rich Magazine Studies could be as a field of research. During this period when I was establishing my unit of study and starting to publish in Magazine Studies, Tim Holmes founded the Mapping the Magazine (MtM) conferences; originally at Cardiff University, UK, and then in cities like Chicago, Sydney (where we hosted one year), and then in Lisbon. More recently, Carla Rodrigues Cardoso and Ana Figueiras head up a dynamic magazine research hub (which includes this journal), and they now also host the Future of Magazines (FoM) conferences at the Universidade Lusófona in Lisbon, Portugal. Lisbon is now the gathering place for international scholars who share a love of magazines.

When I was teaching my postgraduate students, one of the topics we loved discussing was iconic Australian editors—women—and learning about their professional histories and professional rivalries, but almost no academic literature existed about Australian editors. In the 1980s and 1990s, Australians were avid magazine readers and the market was a lucrative and intensely competitive one. Without question, the best-known Australian magazine editor (to this day) is Ita Buttrose, but Dulcie Boling and Nene King were publishing

1 Researchers can look readership figures up here: <https://www.roymorgan.com/readerships/australian-magazine-readership>.

2 Le Masurier retired some years ago now.

powerhouses (and intense rivals) when they helmed two weekly glossies: *New Idea* and *Woman's Day*, and they were feared and highly respected publishing figures who made their bosses very wealthy men. Television series dramatizing their professional lives have been made about all three women. The first was *Paper Giants: The Birth of Cleo* (about Buttrose's time launching Australia's version of *Cosmopolitan* called *Cleo*) and then a second series called *Paper Giants: Magazine Wars* about King and Boling and their enormous success selling weekly magazines peddling gossip about the British royals and local and international celebrities. King's flamboyant persona, and the tragic death of her husband in a diving accident, also made for gripping television and, of course, generated many magazine stories.³

My students and I also liked discussing the next generation of female editors who were mentored by or grew up with Buttrose, Boling and King as role models. Mia Freedman is one of those women who went on to edit *Cosmopolitan* in Australia from 1996-2002 and then form her own digital media company Mama Mia, with a suite of podcasts and a number of books. Freedman is still a household name (at least for women of my generation), and a television series about her called *Strife* (2023-2025) tells part of her story. I was conscious, however, that the stories of so many extremely talented and successful editors who were household names (or should have been) in the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s would soon fade from Australian publishing history when I saw the writing was on the wall about the impact of what was then called the 'digital disruption'. I wanted to preserve these women's stories but also to learn about how they were adapting to the new digital environment

and new ways of creating and disseminating content.⁴ This seemed like an important moment in magazine publishing history to capture. Many editors were kind enough to share their stories with me for a book of interviews that I subsequently published called *Queens of Print: Interviews with Australia's Iconic Women's Magazine Editors* (2019)

I divided that book into three sections. The first looked at powerhouse female editors who started their careers in the 1970s and 1980s, like Ita Buttrose, Julia Zaetta, Karin Upton Baker, Sandra Hook, Shona Martyn, Pat Ingram, and Nene King. The second looked at luminaries from the 1990s and early 2000s like: Kathy Bail, Marina Go, Jackie Frank, Carolyn 'Bunty' Avieson⁵, Kirstie Clements, Paula Joye, Sarah Wilson, Helen McCabe, and Kellie Hush. The third section focused on the new generation of editors who were grappling with the decline of print and the rise of digital and featured interviews with Louisa Hatfield, Kerrie McCallum, Amy Sinclair, Justine Cullen, Edwina McCann, Fiona Connolly, Keshnee Kemp, Emily Taylor, Sarrah Le Marquand, Jo Walker, Jess Blanch and Lisa Messenger. Looking back just a few years later, I'm grateful that 28 amazing editors took time to speak with me and record their stories. Several other successful editors (including Alison Veness, Mia Freedman and Deborah Thomas) allowed me to interview them but ultimately decided not to be included in the book. Kathy Bail and Elissa Blake, who were two of the first women to edit Australian *Rolling Stone*, kindly shared their insights into women about being a woman covering the music industry, and that piece appeared in *Persona Studies* (2019). I spoke with several other magazine and beauty editor success stories like Zoë Foster Blake⁶, Melissa

3 Indeed, Peter FitzSimons published her story in a biography simply entitled *Nene* (2013).

4 I also wrote about this in a journal article published in *Journalism Studies* (2017) where I tracked one editor's rhetorical moves to prompt readers of a custom print magazine to read digital content.

5 Avieson is now also an academic at Sydney University in the Discipline of Media and Communication.

6 Foster-Blake worked as a magazine journalist specialising in beauty and has now written over a dozen books (fiction, non-fiction, advice) and started her own hugely successful skincare company called 'Go To'.

Kang⁷, Tamara Davis⁸, Sally Wright⁹ and Jacqui Mooney¹⁰ but have not yet written about them in a substantial way. For international scholars reading this who want to know about the recent history of Australian magazines and women working in leadership positions in publishing, I hope these interviews and the contextual material in that book and various other journal articles I have written are a useful resource.

In talking with these women, I discovered that many of these Australian female editors have published memoirs about their time in magazine publishing, or they have written novels based on their experiences. For example, Ita Buttrose (*A Passionate Life* and several others), Mia Freedman (*Mama Mia*, *Mia Culpa*, *The New Black*, *Work*, *Strife*, *Balance*), Justine Cullen (*Semi-Gloss*), Sarah Wilson (*First, We Make the Beast Beautiful*), Kirstie Clements (*The Vogue Factor*, *Tongue in Chic*), Marina Go (*Breakthrough*), and Lisa Messenger has published over a dozen books which combine business advice, motivation, and memoir.¹¹ If one considers how many international editors like Tina Brown (*The Vanity Fair Diaries*), Katie Betts (*My Paris Dream*), Jean Godfrey-June (*Free Gift With Purchase*), Cat Marnell (*How to Murder Your Life*), have written about their time editing magazines or working as beauty editors, there is ample material for a special issue or an edited collection or monograph examining a range of memoirs from around the world. That hasn't happened yet, but perhaps it will one day?

The reason that I'm writing this essay, however, is that another idea that germinated when talking with the editors featured in *Queens of Print* is that their stories would make very

watchable content for television and film. As I readied that first book for publication in 2019, I started compiling what ended up being a long list of films and television shows that were centred on magazine workplaces: think *Ugly Betty*, *Suddenly Susan*, *Just Shoot Me*, *The Bold Type* and the list goes on. Much to my delight, I then discovered that there is a whole field devoted to depictions of the journalist in popular culture – primarily film, but some work was emerging about television too. Fast forward, and this has been my scholarly obsession for the last seven years, and the editors of this journal have been kind enough to ask me to write about the evolution of the book here.

The top scholars working in the area of the image of the journalist in popular culture, like Joe Saltzman, Matthew Ehrlich, Howard Good, Loren Ghiglione, Richard Ness, and Brian McNair, have all written monographs about film (primarily American films about journalism). They are all associated with the journal the *Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture (IJPC)*, and they are the drivers of most of the scholarly activity in this area. In more recent years, Chad Painter and Patrick Ferrucci have published extensively (together and with other researchers) about the representation of journalists in popular culture, and they have branched into the important area of television. Several of their articles examine how women are portrayed negatively on screen as unscrupulous or incompetent journalists (2012, 2015). In recent months, Ferrucci has published in the *IJPC* journal what he calls "A Theoretical Model for Understanding Journalism in Film" which illustrates how compromised women's careers in journalism are in portrayals that

7 Kang is now a Professor of Adolescent Health at the University of Sydney but for many years she wrote the enormously successful and well-respected 'Dolly Doctor' columns in *Dolly* magazine.

8 Davis was an editor of *Girlfriend* and *Total Girl Magazine* and then has worked for *Mamamia* and a number of other titles.

9 Wright co-founded Medium Rare Content which has been one of the most successful agencies in Australia providing custom content and she was an early entrepreneur working across digital publishing platforms.

10 Mooney edits *Women's Health Australia*.

11 Others like Avieson took their writing in a completely different direction and she published a number of chilling crime novels: *Apartment 255* (2002) *The Affair* (2003), and *The Wrong Door* (2004). Another of Avieson's interests is the media in Bhutan (and Wikipedia).

represent them or their career prospects in negative ways on screen (2025). I discovered that scholars like McNair, Saltzman, Good, Ferrucci and Painter were starting to recognise that there was a problem with the way that female journalists are portrayed in popular culture, but no one had yet identified this as an issue that lies at the heart of how magazines are portrayed in popular culture and how magazine journalism is characterised in definitions of journalism itself.

This early research into the field of the image of the journalist in popular culture confirmed my belief that there was a significant gap in the scholarship about magazines and magazine workplaces as they are depicted on screen. The driving research questions I started with were related to gender. Why so many images of male journalists? Why so many films about investigative journalists and hard news but fewer about lifestyle journalism? Newspapers and broadcast television shows were the subject of so many important films about the journalist in popular culture, but where were the magazines? Why so much scholarship about film but very little about television? Where do magazines sit in the in-group/out-group boundaries that are erected by journalists about 'real' journalism? Is fashion and lifestyle journalism actually journalism, and who decides? Why do magazines matter? Where do feminism and femininity sit in these discussions? Who holds the power in these fictionalised magazine workplaces? These questions are all addressed in my upcoming book *The Gendered Image of the Magazine Journalist on Television and Screen: Fashion and the Failing Feminist* (Routledge, forthcoming, 2026).

To make that happen, I reached out to scholars working across several interrelated areas that intersected with the image of the journalist in popular culture in, for example, magazine studies (of course!), gender studies, or fashion, and to those who already had a track record writing about important television shows set in magazine workplaces like the beloved *Ugly Betty* or the extremely topical *The Bold Type*.

And everyone has an opinion about or a favourite line from the first *The Devil Wears Prada* film (2006) and so scholarship did exist about that film but not specifically in relation to magazines (rather than fashion exclusively). I was fortunate that 18 brilliant scholars from around the globe responded to my invitation to contribute: Richard R Ness, Quinlan Miller, Niall Richardson, Rose Williamson, Wyatt Moss-Wellington, Lili Pâquet, Justine Brisset, Joke Hermes, Myles Ethan Lascity, Mayka Castellano, Melina Meimaridis, Beth Montemurro, Grace Kelly, Maxine De Wulf Helskens, Chad Painter, Lisa Anderson, Jennifer Esposito, and Jade Miller. Films under analysis include: *Slander* (1957), *The Best of Everything* (1958), *13 Going on 30* (2004), *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003), and *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006). And, television case studies include shows like: *Living Single* (1993-1998), *Suddenly Susan* (1996-2000), *Ugly Betty* (2006-2010), *Paper Giants: The Birth of Cleo* (2011), *Dietland* (2018), *Inventing Anna* (2022), *The Bold Type* (2017-2021), reality show *Running in Heels* (2009), and documentary *Mademoiselle C* (2013). The book comprises 14 case studies plus a lengthy introduction.

What the book explains is that, from very early in the twentieth century, filmmakers were drawn to journalists (chiefly as heroes) and journalism as a noble profession defending free speech and acting as the Fourth Estate. Investigative journalism, where heroes solved crimes, uncovered corruption, and exposed conspiracies, proved both dramatic and irresistible for audiences. Mostly, those journalists are newspapermen. What chapters by Ness and Miller uncover, however, is that there were many examples of films that portrayed tabloids as 'dirt' and those who worked for them as contemptible villains (media owners and publishers, especially). If present at all in these narratives, the trajectory for women was generally not positive, with workers subjected to sexual harassment and assault. If we fast forward to films and television shows set in the 1990s and early 2000s before the Global Financial Crisis and the onslaught of digital, as Lascity argues (2024), we see an optimistic collection of films and television sitcoms

that situate magazine workplaces as desirable working environments for aspirational women – particularly women who are interested in lifestyle and fashion magazines. The chapters written by Richardson, Williamson, Moss-Wellington, and Pâquet, Lascity, Castellano and Meimaridis, Montemurro and Kelly, De Wulf Helskens, Painter, Anderson and I, and Esposito all address different aspects of this positive portrayal of magazines. How the various characters engage with feminism (whether they label themselves feminists or not) is of particular interest. In these shows, we see how well magazine offices work as the backdrop for sitcoms, in particular. The regular cycle of weekly or monthly deadlines, interesting guest stars, fashion, and romance provide reliable plot lines. While also painting journalism as a desirable (if challenging and stubbornly sexist) profession for women, one slight outlier to this section was the fascinating *Inventing Anna*, based on the real story of Anna Delvey/Sorokin, and Painter takes us through the show's positive portrayal of magazine journalism (the character Vivian Kent chasing a story) and two negative depictions of magazine journalism and magazine culture.

We also discovered that the editor retains a goddess-like status in shows like *Paper Giants* and *The Bold Type* and this is examined in chapters by Richardson, Williamson, Moss-Wellington, and Pâquet, De Wulf Helskens, and Anderson and I. De Wulf Helskens, Montemurro and Kelly, and Brisset and Hermes also observed that in several cases real editors were active in constructing their iconic status through involvement with productions like *Running in Heels*, *Mademoiselle C*, and *The Bold Type*. To this day, Marjorie Ferguson's work on the editor as a 'high priestess' to 'the cult of femininity' (1983) proved to be an important touch point for the almost rockstar status of some editors and the influence they have over consumers. In chapters by Anderson and I, and one by Esposito, we see how race and ethnicity are situated

in magazine culture and we learn how influential *Living Single* has been as a forerunner not only to other sitcoms set in magazine offices but also to groups of young professionals living in share accommodation in New York and navigating their professional and personal lives (does that 'friendly' scenario sound familiar?). The effervescent Betty Suarez from *Ugly Betty* is the subject of two chapters that address Betty's status as a Latina and the racism she encounters in her magazine workplace (Esposito's chapter) and a second by Jade Miller that looks at the global streaming success of the Betty brand and its record-breaking success. Closing out with the confronting *Dietland*, I explain how this series portrays what it calls 'magazine culture' with 'rape culture'. It's a dark but incredibly provocative look at magazines, fatness, sexual violence, and feminist vigilantes, and it stars a truly memorable evil editor named Kitty Montgomery (played by Julianna Margulies). Kitty's diva behaviour resembles some aspects of Miranda Priestly from *The Devil Wears Prada*, but Kitty is a far more ruthless and less likeable character. What we see, overall, is that if we expand the category of the image of the journalist in popular culture to include magazine journalists and women, we get snapshots of how women are negotiating their careers and their trajectories and the place of the magazine in that journey.

Given the richness of every film or television show discussed in the book, I now feel that I could write another book about every one of them included in the collection. However, there are other fascinating television series that have either been ignored completely by scholars or have received little attention in relation to what they tell us about magazines and magazine journalists. Next, I need to turn my attention to shows like *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992-2012), *Central Park West* (1995-1996), *The Naked Truth* (1995-1998), *Just Shoot Me* (1997-2003), *Dirt* (2007-2008),¹² *Minx* (2022-2023), and the

12 I am currently writing a journal article about another television series that I recently discovered: Courteney Cox's *Dirt* (2007-2008). I believe it is a fascinating example of how female editors are portrayed on screen with much attention devoted to their marital status and whether they have children.

aforementioned *Strife* (2023-2025). In 2022, I wrote about magazines and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), but I have not yet had time to study *And Just Like That...* (2023-2025) and so that is yet another opportunity. There are many more reality shows set in magazine offices (some with crossovers into modelling reality shows) like *Stylista* (2008, 13 episodes), *Miss Seventeen* (2005, 10 episodes, set in *Seventeen* magazine) and *The Hills* (2006-2010, and set at *Teen Vogue*) and so gaps and opportunities abound. And, of course, we are all still digesting the new *The Devil Wears Prada 2* film (released last month in May 2026). The sequel confronts head on the 'death' of the magazine and is rightly described as an 'elegy for magazines' (Cruz, 2026). I believe it is an important film about magazines and a whole industry in crisis. Who could forget the character Emily's taunt: 'Remember when magazines were a thing?' Readers of this journal remember, and given that in just over a month the film has already earned \$650 million (USD), it would appear that audiences remember (and love) magazines too.

For those who are new to Magazine Studies or who have stumbled upon this piece by accident—and my whole career proves this happens—I hope this essay demonstrates the richness of Magazine Studies as an area of disciplinary specialization. I hope it illustrates that it is possible to approach magazine studies from multiple directions given that my work has ranged from interviews, content analysis of magazines, close reading of individual films and whole television series, and pieces about assessment and pedagogy. For scholars, like me, with diverse and inter-disciplinary interests, Magazine Studies provides unending research opportunities. I have a lot to thank the late Elizabeth Webby for given that she accidentally started me on this scholarly adventure.

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