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Reader letters to women’s health magazines: Inscribing the “will to health”

Abstract

Women’s health magazines emerged as a new cultural industry at the end of the twentieth century, representing a commercial application of the “will to health” developing in neoliberal societies. This paper explores recurring discourses in reader letters published between 1997 and 2000 in two Australian health magazines targeting white, middle-class women. Both GoodMedicine and Nature & Health are engaged in a similar cultural politics, tempting their audiences away from the established women’s lifestyle, beauty, and fashion publications by representing health magazine content as natural, practical and generally “good for you”. Reader letters published in these magazines deploy the discourses of pragmatism, authenticity and critical engagement as new cultural imperatives for performing the “normal, healthy woman”. However, they offer little recognition of the social determinants of health, or the connections between individual practice and global biopolitics. Reader letters inscribe both the successes and failures experienced in performing the “will to health”, and have considerable potential to facilitate new ways of negotiating these cultural imperatives.
Introduction

In the last few years of the twentieth century, several Australian “health” magazines were launched, establishing a new cultural industry organised around the health concerns of magazine audiences. Two of the most successful are GoodMedicine and Nature & Health, which both target white, middle-class Australian women, while claiming to offer something different from the longstanding tradition of women’s magazines. This “healthicisation” (Peter Conrad 1992, p. 223) of women’s magazines complicates the traditional feminist critique by shifting the lens from the historically fraught genres of beauty and fashion toward the comparatively neutral genre of health and wellbeing. This paper explores three discourses evident in reader letters published in GoodMedicine and Nature & Health between 1997 and 2000 which inscribe new cultural imperatives for performing the “normal, healthy woman”.

While these discourses undoubtedly contribute to the commercialisation (e.g., Ray Moynihan et al. 2002) and medicalisation of health (e.g., Ivan Illich 2003) as well as the social regulation of femininity norms (e.g., Susan Bordo 1993; Estella Tincknell et al. 2003), this paper is also interested in their potential for facilitating new modes of audience engagement.

What is it about the contemporary notion of “health” that it can mobilise a new genre of women’s media to become both commercially sustainable and culturally appropriate at the end of the twentieth century? Nikolas Rose suggests that the cultural politics of health must be understood in relation to the rise of neoliberalism or “advanced liberalism” in western democratic nations. Among many other characteristics of neoliberalism, Rose has identified an: “emphasis upon creating active individuals who will take responsibility for their own fates through the exercise of choice, and the organization of socio-political concerns around the management and minimization of risks to lifestyles of contentment and consumption” (2000, p. 337). Individual responsibility is not a contemporary phenomenon but is rather, as Rose Galvin has suggested, “embedded in traditional notions of illness and sin” (2002, p.
However, a uniquely contemporary outcome of the social and political developments associated with neoliberalism has been described by Nikolas Rose as the “will to health”:

Every citizen must now become an active partner in the drive for health, accepting their responsibility for securing their own well-being … This new “will to health” is increasingly capitalized by enterprises ranging from the pharmaceutical companies to food retailers. And a whole range of pressure groups, campaigning organizations, self-help groups have come to occupy the space of desires, anxieties, disappointments and ailments between the will to health and the experience of its absence. Within this complex network of forces and images, the health-related aspirations and conduct of individuals is governed “at a distance”, by shaping the ways they understand and enact their own freedom (2001, p. 6).

The cultural impact of the “will to health” includes what Robert Crawford has identified as the “ideology of healthism” (1980, p. 368), in which a marker of good citizenship becomes the commitment to “ceaselessly maintain and improve his or her own health by using a whole range of measures” (Robin Bunton and Roger Burrows 1995, p. 208). Commercial applications of healthism include the weight loss, physical fitness and cosmetic industries, and the broadening range of “alternative” self-health products and services (Michael M. McQuaide 2005). This paper argues that women’s health magazines capitalise on this healthism culture and that their letter pages have come to occupy a crucial space for inscribing the “desires, anxieties, disappointments and ailments” of magazine audiences in pursuit of the “will to health” (Nikolas Rose 2001, p. 6). The first section of the paper provides a background to women’s health magazines in Australia, and outlines the methods followed in exploring reader letters. The main body of the paper examines the discourses of pragmatism, authenticity and critical engagement evident in reader letters as exemplifying this “will to health”.
Background and method

Health magazines are proving to be a commercial success in Australia. Although they do not yet challenge the reach of major titles such as *Australian Women’s Weekly*, health magazines have nonetheless achieved similar circulations to the proven genres of sports and fashion. Health magazines for men have also been successfully launched in recent years, most prominently the global franchising of *Men’s Health* magazine (Christy Newman 2005). However, women continue to be the primary target of most health media published to date.

As Marcus Doel and Jeremy Segrott have observed:

> Despite their discussion of generic health issues, such as stress and personal relationships, [health] magazines are primarily concerned with female health, and health as a specifically female issue ... The presentation of [complementary and alternative medicine, for example] tends to focus on “natural” therapies that have come to be associated with purportedly “feminine” qualities such as sensuous touch and the release of emotions, and are therefore presumed to be appealing to women (2003, pp. 137--138).

Both *GoodMedicine* and *Nature & Health* target white, middle-class, middle aged, heterosexual and able-bodied women, and idealise this audience as proactive and engaged with a wide range of conventional and alternative therapies. Health magazines tempt their audiences away from the established women’s lifestyle, beauty, and fashion publications by representing health magazine content as natural, practical and generally “good for you”. This ethics of media “utility” enables health magazines to be organised around “the acquisition of techniques for fabricating the healthy self” (Robin Bunton 1997, pp. 238--239). These techniques are then presented through the frame of “infotainment”, providing a range of
health-related information within the conventions of established women’s magazines (Frances Bonner and Susan McKay 2003).

Launched in 1998 by one of Australia’s leading magazine publishers, ACP Magazines, **GoodMedicine** developed from fairly modest beginnings to reach a circulation of around 65,000 in 2005, ranked at number forty five in the “top 100” Australian consumer magazines in terms of circulation and thirty two in terms of readership (Magazine Publishers of Australia 2005a; 2005b). This monthly magazine reproduces a range of health information from both the mainstream and alternative health sectors, and actively expands the definitions of “health” to encompass beauty, relationships and career. The ACP Magazines website (2005) claims **GoodMedicine** is:

For people with a healthy attitude to life! Our aim is to make **GoodMedicine** informative, up-to-date, relevant to women’s lives and entertaining. Every issue is packed with information---cutting edge medical advances, psychology, relationship, kids, food, beauty and much more. Above all, we want to empower our readers with a sense that they can do something POSITIVE to enjoy a long and healthy life.

**Nature & Health** was originally launched in 1979 as a newsletter of the natural therapies company Blackmores, and has been published since 1994 as a bi-monthly national magazine by the Yaffa Publishing Group. **Nature & Health** has a circulation of around 36,500 (Yaffa Publishing 2000) and readership has been estimated at 124,000, ranking this magazine at number eight six in Australia’s Top 100 (Magazine Publishers of Australia 2005b). While this magazine is primarily aligned with the alternative health industries, it has many similarities to **GoodMedicine**. The Yaffa Publishing website (2005) states that:

**Nature & Health** is a magazine for the rapidly growing number of educated and responsive people who are interested in maintaining a naturally healthy lifestyle. Topics include beauty, nutrition, healthy living, sport, aerobics and relationships.
Nature & Health is regularly supported by advertisers looking for a targeted, affluent, health conscious readership of men and women who are striving to stay healthy and positive in the new millennium.

While Nature & Health may be promoted as representing both men and women, the visual conventions of the magazine are clearly marketed to female audiences. The photographic models are always young, white women, and the content capitalises on the increasing turn to alternative health within a markedly middle-class framework. In this way, both Nature & Health and GoodMedicine are engaged in a similar cultural politics of health, commodifying the anxieties of middle-class Australian women regarding their health, happiness and wellbeing.

For the current analysis, reader letters were collected from a selection of issues of each magazine published between January 1997 (GoodMedicine was launched in mid 1998) and December 2000 (see Table 1 for the number of letters collected in each year). One hundred and eighteen reader letters were collected in total: forty four from Nature & Health and seventy four from GoodMedicine. The greater number from GoodMedicine is due to the different frequency that each of the magazines is published, and a greater number of letters published in each issue of GoodMedicine. In the time period investigated for this study, reader letters in both magazines were published on a single “letters” page, located in the first ten or eleven pages of the magazine. Occasionally a prize such as a sample pack of aromatherapy products was offered alongside a postal address and request for readers to submit letters of feedback or commentary. Between three and six letters were typically published in each issue, with more letters published in each issue of GoodMedicine. The average length of letters varies considerably, with a 118 word mean for GoodMedicine compared to eighty one for Nature & Health. Across the total sample, only 11% of letters
were published anonymously, with 68% of readers providing a full name and 21% providing either initials or given name or surname only.

Table 1: Number of letters collected by year

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The main aim of the analysis was to explore discourses in reader letters published in the genre of women’s health magazines. However, letters were also subject to a comparative appraisal to identify any apparent differences between the two magazines. Despite ongoing debates about the meaning of “discourse” (R. Keith Sawyer 2002), this concept was essential to the analysis, since it conceives of a single text such as a reader letter as constitutive of a complex and multilayered series of semiotic relations between language, people, technologies, cultures and so on. Following Dorothy E. Smith, “The notion of discourse displaces the analysis from the text as originating in writer or thinker, to the discourse itself as an ongoing intertextual process” (1990, p. 161). Further to this, it is important to explain that this paper is not concerned with validating whether or not reader letters are written by “real” readers, because regardless of whether published letters are a genuine “voice for the people”, they nonetheless create particular impressions of the reading public, thereby contributing to the discursive constitution of magazine audiences. Kathryn Shevelow
creatively manages the issue of textual authenticity in a historical analysis of reader letters in the Athenian Mercury, where she suggests that:

… the reader “represented” is the reader constructed, not necessarily because her letter is an editorial fabrication, but because the representation of the self in writing is always a construction, whether on the part of the alleged writer or on the part of the periodical’s editors (1989, pp. 67--68).

A similar approach is taken in this paper in that magazine audiences are seen to be “always a construction”, whether or not the reader letters published as their testimonials can be proven to be authentic.

A small but important lineage of reader letter research can be traced across the disciplines of media studies, history, linguistics, politics and sociology. Much of this scholarship is interested in how reader letters contribute to the production of cultural identity through ethnic and political affiliations (Fernando P Delgado 1998; Jane Mummery and Debbie Rodan 2003), sexual politics (Heidi Frank 2002; Sue Jackson 2005) or historic shifts in the participation of women in public discourse (Eva Moskowitz 1996; Sarah Pedersen 2004; Lynne Warren 2000). John Richardson and Bob Franklin have published insightful research in this field, observing, for example, that newspaper editors act as gatekeepers in regulating the scope of debates about multiculturalism (2003), and local political parties in the United Kingdom shape the content of letters pages around the time of local elections (2004). Others have explored the linguistics of gossip in letters to men’s magazines (Bethan Benwell 2001) and the social and spiritual concerns expressed in letters to Amish magazines (Philip Berg 1997).

Brian Thornton has published an fascinating study on historical change in reader letters that argues it is becoming less common to read letters that directly critique media ethics or journalistic practice (1998). Karin Wahl-Jorgensen has argued that newspaper
editors apply the four rules of relevance, brevity, entertainment and authority in selecting letters for publication (2002), and articulate three “modes of publicity” in categorising the letters page as dialogist (facilitating rational debate between equal players), activist (empowering marginalised groups) or exhibitionist (promoting subjective experiences to elicit empathy) (2001). While this range of research has offered considerable breadth to the study of reader letters, there have been no investigations to date of reader letters in women’s health magazines, and almost none on health media more broadly (e.g., Christy Newman 2005). Therefore, this analysis is also informed by critical and cultural studies of magazines, embodiment, consumer culture, neoliberalism and health.

**Pragmatism and responsibility: “Keep up the good work”**

The first discourse evident in these letters is described as the discourse of pragmatism or what Stan van Hooft has described as a “pragmatic” mode of subjectivity, namely: “the sphere of our lives which includes our deliberating about and purposively doing the things that we do” (1997, p. 25). This is a common discourse in health magazines, which Doel and Segrott recognised in their description of a UK alternative health magazine as a “pragmatic tool kit” (2003, pp. 134--135). Most reader letters that articulate this discourse seek to acquire material and information resources to aid health and wellbeing and in this way validate the cultural imperative to take personal responsibility for enacting the “will to health”.

In both publications, letters that articulate a discourse of pragmatism are mostly written in celebration of health magazines. Several letters published in *GoodMedicine* are particularly evocative of this celebratory tone as can be seen in the following letter, entitled “A true believer”:

I try not to miss an issue of *GoodMedicine* as I find all the articles very interesting. I’m also a big believer in herbal medicine and natural therapies, rather
than using antibiotics, which I believe do more harm than good. As a beauty therapist, I also learned a few interesting make-up camouflage tips from your May issue. I am a single mother with seven-year-old twin daughters, and have found a lot of your relaxation articles helpful. Keep up the good work (Marianne Smith 2000).

This letter promotes the two relatively discrete consumer markets of herbal medicine and beauty therapy, providing an interesting example of how GoodMedicine appeals to consumers of both the “natural” and the “cosmetic”. Nature & Health also publishes many letters celebrating the pragmatism of health magazines. However, the language of these letters is often considerably more exuberant, as in the following letter, entitled “Love Letter”:

I just wanted to say thank you for producing a magazine that brings me so much joy. The articles always inspire me to live a positive and healthy lifestyle. The thought of the next issue brings a smile to my face and gives me hope when I’m feeling down. My knowledge of natural health is growing, thanks to you. I wanted to let you know what you are doing is very positive and powerful (Belinda Wood 1998).

This letter suggests that Nature & Health makes it possible for audiences to become engaged as pragmatic consumers in their own various social contexts. Complicating this a little, Nature & Health also publishes letters from the health care practitioners who are promoted or who advertise in the magazine: “Very many thanks for running the article about me and my reflexology courses” (Chris Stormer 1997). By incorporating letters from service providers alongside the potential consumers of those services, Nature & Health positions itself as an apparently open and egalitarian space for the natural health community to engage with a range of experts.
Women’s health magazines have also emerged as an interface for readers to make direct and specialist requests of health experts. *Nature & Health* publishes many letters seeking particular pieces of information, sometimes written in response to published articles but mostly introducing a new topic. Others initiate an independent communication between audience members to share information and provide support, positioning the magazine as an intermediary rather than authority. Three of these letters from *Nature & Health* are reproduced here:

I am desperate for help. I cannot tolerate wheat in any form---it provokes an immune response which causes painful arthritis-like symptoms in all my joints. Have any *Nature & Health* readers got good recipes for bread, cakes, biscuits, pancakes, pizza bases, etc? (Carolyn Farmer 1998).

I am interested to know about liquid bovine tracheal cartilage. My mother has been diagnosed with ovarian cancer, and the little I have read about this product intrigues me as it may help her. Can anyone give me any advice? (JF 2000).

Nine months ago my daughter had a car accident and is now a paraplegic. She is starting to get some movement back into her legs but is easily depressed and bad-tempered. I was wondering whether any other readers out there have any suggestions? (B Pritchett 1998).

These letters offer a range of insights into the life worlds of the reading audience, seeking information on food intolerance, alternative cancer treatments, and emotional support for paraplegia. Despite the urgency of these requests, they are expressed in very pragmatic terms, and are focused on a particular need with a specific outcome. By directing the request to other magazine readers, letters produce a sense of shared audience pragmatism facilitated by, rather than reliant upon, the media form itself.
A discourse of pragmatism is also articulated in letters that contribute new information on a previously published topic. The following letters from *Nature & Health* demonstrate this highly engaged mode of audience participation:

I suffered with [Rosacea] for three years … In desperation, I had my mercury amalgam fittings removed. Since then, the problem has almost disappeared, and I would describe myself as 95 per cent cured (Bill Gillespie 1999).

I enjoyed your article on Saw Palmetto for a Healthy Prostate in the December 1998 issue. I’d like to add a few points … prostate health often hinges on abstaining from alcohol, coffee and other caffeinated beverages, and sometimes tobacco (Mark Bortelli 1999).

*Nature & Health* letters often resemble the retelling of “folk” wisdom. *GoodMedicine* letters draw more directly on conventional biomedical knowledge:

SAD (seasonal affective disorder) … affects neurotransmitters and daily biological rhythms in susceptible people, causing recurrent autumn/winter depressions along with hypsomomia (increased sense of smell), lowered energy levels, carbohydrate cravings, weight gain and social withdrawal (Margaret Austin 1998).

Scoliosis is not just a lateral curvature of the spine, it is a multi-faceted skeletal and muscular disease that affects one in nine young women. Left untreated, it often results in crippling spine and rib-cage deformities (Lin Harrington 2000).

While health magazines promote pragmatism and responsibility as “healthy” values for Australian women and their families, they provide little acknowledgement of these social determinants of health, which are likely to include but not be limited to “poverty, drugs, working conditions, unemployment, social support, good food and transport policy” (Richard Wilkinson and Michael Marmot 2003). As these reader letters indicate, the information
shared in health magazines is almost entirely related to individual behaviour, with little recognition of the social, economic or political conditions that may limit behavioural choices. Audiences are expected to bear the burden of responsibility for achieving good health, and on the converse, for admitting culpability for illness and disability, whether or not those outcomes could have been influenced by individual practice. As Heidi Marie Rimke has argued: “individuals are rendered entirely responsible for their failures as well as their successes, their despair as well as their happiness. Indeed, this is the social subject of a liberal governance” (2000, p. 63). In this way, the discourse of pragmatism in reader letters perpetuates the imperative to take personal responsibility for health, and presents stories of both success and failure in this quest as testimonials to a shared “will to health”.

**Authenticity and beauty: “I am now happy with the image I see”**

The second discourse evident in these letters is that of authenticity, honouring “authentic” femininity above the fashions of beauty culture. Promoting the authentic subject as one concerned with issues that are “deeper” than cosmetic appearance is a crucial marketing strategy for health magazines. Women’s (and men’s) health magazines encompass a considerable range of information on beauty, but this is usually presented within a discursive framework of “looking healthy” or choosing “natural” skin care and “herbal” weight-loss treatments. Both *Nature & Health* and *GoodMedicine* promote a visual culture of “thin white women” (Sean Redmond 2003), but they achieve a differentiation from more conventional women’s fashion and beauty magazines by prioritising a visual semiotics of “health”: jogging on the beach in workout clothes, lying in an aromatherapy bath with rose petals, or beaming in the arms of a robust male partner. The enduring conflation between “health” and “beauty” in women’s health magazines warrants critical reflection from feminist media scholars.
While health magazine images point to western signifiers of youth and beauty, they also contribute to the representation of a “healthy femininity” as committed to the pursuit of health, longevity and wellbeing above all other concerns. There has been a similar movement in men’s health magazines in which “looking good” becomes socially legitimated as a central aspect of “looking after yourself”, rather than operating as a challenge to the traditional self-consciousness of masculine beauty cultures (Christy Newman 2005). What is interesting about women’s health magazines is they are informed by longstanding tensions around the fixed parameters of female “beauty”. As Smith suggests, “in the context of the discourse of femininity, a distinctive relation to self arises … as body to be transformed, an object of work, even of a craft” (1990, p. 187). The remainder of this section focuses on reader letter debates about beauty and femininity in GoodMedicine, with a particular interest in how a discourse of authenticity was articulated and negotiated in this context. Although both magazines published reader letters that inscribe this discourse, in the time period investigated in this study only GoodMedicine letters were explicitly concerned with negotiating the terms of beauty culture. This does not mean that Nature & Health is not implicated in the discursive conflation between health and beauty, but that GoodMedicine letters dealt more directly with the social expectations of female beauty and the limits of women’s beauty culture.

Most reader letters that engage with beauty culture are organised around the stereotypical “problem areas” for women, including breast size, body fat, cellulite and skin care. They include requests for relevant product information such as “In September GoodMedicine, you tell us about the bra to make your breasts grow. I want that bra now!” (Barbare Kastanek 1999). In this respect, health magazines are little different from most women’s magazines in their preoccupation with beauty culture. However, health magazines legitimate this preoccupation with direct reference to public health ideals. As Petersen and Lupton have observed:
The feminine “healthy” citizen, it is suggested, should seek both soundness of body and physical allure … In these discourses there is an elision between the ideals of commodity culture and public health, for both promote the slim, attractive, healthy, physically fit, youthful body as that which women should seek to attain (1996, p. 80).

Following this logic, there is no paradox in the notion of “health in beauty” since the visual markers of physical health are so closely aligned with cultural conventions of beauty.

In January 1999, a series of eight reader letters was published in GoodMedicine as a competition for a free sample of a new herbal treatment for cellulite. The editor had requested readers justify their reasons for needing the sample; extracts from two of the letters are reproduced here:

When I turned 16, dimples started to appear on my legs. Now I am almost 30 and my cellulite problem is haunting me … It is difficult to express my feelings about this without wanting to scream. [Product A] seems like my last hope to see legs I’m proud of instead of legs I hate (HG 1999).

I am 40 years old and weigh 90kg. In 1988, I weighed 65kg and had liposuction. The operation went wrong. Instead of sucking out five litres of fat, doctors sucked out two litres of fat and three litres of blood … [Product A] may be my only chance (TD 1999).

These letters defend the need for cosmetic intervention by arguing that “Product A” offers a last minute reprieve from cosmetic deformity. The promotion of these products is clearly driven by a commercial logic interested in expanding the consumer markets for herbal beauty treatments. Yet these letters suggest a far more complex relationship between audiences and beauty culture than can be grasped in a critique of commercialisation. Both authors want to make the more authentic claim to a need for cosmetic intervention. A similar culture of
authenticity claims has been observed by Frances Bonner (2004) in reality television programs that offer the “gift” of a body, home or garden makeover to those who can prove they are morally deserving.

Although some reader letters appear to submit willingly to the conventional parameters of beauty culture, others promote authenticity as a rejection of the policing of western femininities. The social trend towards “authenticity” has been complemented by the popularity of holistic philosophies of health, as well as self-help and popular psychology discourse. As Jeremy Howell and Alan Ingham observe: “the ‘new’ healthy you has to be a ‘true’ you” (2001, p. 343). As an example of this discourse, the following reader letters provide retrospective biographies of a time before and after finding one’s authentic self:

... it took me a long time to realise you don’t have to risk your life and be wafer thin to look good. I am now happy with the image I see in the mirror---I have an athletic body. Annalise should be an inspiration for a lot of young girls who dream of being a model and think they are too fat. It takes all shapes and sizes (Name supplied 1999).

As a formerly overweight teenager, I know how it feels to be on both sides of the scale. If you are plump, you are teased. If you are thin, certain women become bitchy. Can I suggest to exercise-loathing people that they take up the fun and healthy art of bellydancing … My low self-esteem also improved dramatically, and the dance helped my lower back problems (Kelly Copeland 1999).

These letters critique the belief that women must be thin to be attractive, but do not challenge the associated notion that women must adopt certain behaviours in order to be healthy. The first author privileges the authenticity of “athletic” health above beauty norms. The second offers alternative options for the exercise-phobic, but falls short of suggesting that magazine
audiences should not be concerned with seeking to embody their “true” self through weight loss and exercise programs.

Reader letters occasionally challenge the terms of beauty culture. The following example was published two months after the cellulite competition:

What does cellulite matter if the thighs in question are functional and healthy? Did Mother Teresa, Mum Shirl, Queen Elizabeth I, Caroline Chisholm or Jane Austen ever suffer from cellulite? Who knows? They are remembered for better reasons! It seems to me the battle against cellulite has only one result---a better lifestyle for those who have set themselves up in the anti-cellulite industry! (Sue Fuller 1999).

This letter is unusual in that it specifically critiques the commercial relationships bound up in the health, beauty and magazine industries. The author focuses on the content of other reader letters but does not extend this critique to magazine content. Nonetheless, this letter does indicate that health magazines provide some scope for challenging cultural prescriptions for beauty and health, promoting authenticity as a “healthy” alternative to beauty culture.

Contrary to the belief that, in the words of Henrik Wijsbek, “the beauty imperative sets a new norm [and] those who refuse to submit to it will become stigmatised” (2000, p. 454), reader letters exhibit a potential for transforming the conventions of beauty culture. However, there seems little indication of a significant challenge to “authenticity” as a discourse that intimately regulates the performance of the “will to health”.

**Critical engagement and health: “It’s high time the notion was debunked”**

The final discourse identified in these letters is critical engagement, that is, the articulation of a questioning or oppositional position to mainstream beliefs about health and medicine. This discourse is associated with an increasing social trend to legitimate a critique of authority and
scepticism about expert knowledge. Critical engagement is promoted as a “healthy”
behaviour in the context of women’s health magazines, particularly if focused on the
perceived failings of conventional medicine or media (mis)representations of health and
illness experience.

Nature & Health publishes many letters articulating a critical engagement towards
normative health beliefs, including the following three:

- Your health articles and features always promote the use of alternative medicine
  in healing illnesses. I’m glad. It’s high time the notion that such methods are risky
  and practiced by “quack doctors” was debunked (Karen Liquet 1997).
- I am a registered nurse and, from a professional standpoint, I admire the way you
  report on health issues in a balanced way when it comes to the differences
  between Western reductionist medicine and the more holistic forms of healing
  (Fiona Macphee 1998).
- Let’s all cast our economic votes now for cotton clothing, organic foods, and
  metal and glass in the kitchen. Say no to chemicals to improve your future and
  mine (Nancy Borromeo 2000).

The trend towards critical engagement in consumer health cultures---as well as within the
ranks of many health professions (e.g., Deirdre Wicks 1995)---is mobilised by a perceived
democratic right to question normative beliefs. However, the expanding range of critical
claims that have been legitimated in recent decades means that many women must now
choose between multiple and competing philosophies of health and medicine. Emma Rich
argues that “choice” in the “post-feminist” (Angela McRobbie 2004) era of contemporary
neoliberalism relies on “notions of rational actors who can free themselves from constraint if
they ‘make the effort to do so’” (2005, pp. 501--502). The idea that women have only to
make the right health “choices” ignores both the complex range of determinants that shape
health outcomes and the rapidly shifting boundaries between convention and critique in
consumer health politics.

Both GoodMedicine and Nature & Health publish reader letters that demand better
recognition of neglected or misunderstood illnesses. For example, GoodMedicine published
letters that described the difficulties of living with stigmatized conditions such as
incontinence, acne or mental illness. Other letters dealt with the silence and stigma around
women’s reproductive health: infertility, miscarriage and abortion. The following letter from
Nature & Health is a good example of the use of personal narrative to shore up such a critical
engagement:

Your story on “The Baby Chase” was, I guess, a pleasure to read. You really have
to search for reliable information on the subject of infertility. My husband and I
are childless and, after five years, we know this will not change ... And for the
people who ask childless couples like us ... why they are so selfish, or say “we
don’t know what we’re missing out on”, please try to hold your tongues. One day
I’m going to stand on a high mountain and shout that even though we can’t have
children, it doesn’t mean I’m any less of a woman, or that my husband is any less
of a man (Anonymous 1997).

As Arthur Frank suggests, “stories that ill people tell of their experiences are a technology of
the self: yet another strategy of power in which illness becomes a truth-game, an occasion to
know oneself as the subject of certain social knowledges” (1998, p. 336). While it may be
unbefitting to claim this letter as an illness narrative, health magazine reader letters do take
part in “truth-games” in which the moral authority of experiential knowledge is deployed to
substantiate critical engagements. In the context of health media, such narrative disclosures
are also framed as a therapeutic device which “advocates the benefits of telling the story both
for the woman telling it and the women reading it” (Susan McKay and Frances Bonner 1999, p. 570).

A discourse of critical engagement is also apparent in letters that challenge the accuracy of magazine content, as in the following letter from GoodMedicine:

I refer to your article on chronic fatigue syndrome ... Being a chronic fatigue sufferer since 1991, I could most definitely identify with its contents, but was appalled with your choice of photograph. The subject you used was a beautiful, youthful and fresh-looking woman, whose hair and make-up was just so perfect. Her face was free of dark circles and tired lines. Only a CFS sufferer knows that having the condition is like going to hell and back. Every day is a hard, long struggle and every night ends with a desperate prayer that you wake up looking “normal.” It is vital that you portray the truth about illnesses. The picture you used was laughable (Michelle Maugerie 1999).

This letter rejects the capacity of health magazines to appropriately represent experiential knowledge, and aims to transform public opinion about the private life world of women living with conditions such as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. Karin Wahl-Jorgensen has suggested that this “exhibitionist” mode of public action plays a vital role in the production of the contemporary public sphere, arguing:

… though the embarrassing, the painful, the wonderful, and the beautiful textures of our lives may be grounded in experiences of a deeply personal nature, perhaps they are also the … only way to link us together in an empathic pursuit of the elusive common interest (2001, p. 317).

However, the impact of these public gestures may be particularly limited in the context of health magazines. While reader letters may remind audiences of the diversity of health and illness experiences, an individual story receives little more than a symbolic acknowledgement
before the magazine moves on to the next “illness of the month.” Following Wahl-Jorgensen, “we are faced with the question of how to keep the public sphere from becoming the site for the airing of stories that invite other stories but no true debate” (2001, p. 317). Health magazines are engaged in a critical relationship with the institutions that uphold biomedical authority in western contexts, but the terms of this engagement is limited to questioning social values such as trust in biomedicine. There is little evidence that women’s health magazines promote critical engagement with the notion of a “will to health”, nor allow for the possibility that the lives of magazine audiences might not need to be so relentlessly organised around health and medicine.

Conclusions

Women’s health magazines represent a burgeoning new cultural industry claiming an explicit interest in the health outcomes of media audiences. This paper has demonstrated that reader letters to health magazines articulate three discourses which inscribe new cultural imperatives for the “normal, healthy woman”. Although there were small distinctions between each magazine, such as the absence of letters concerned with authenticity and beauty in Nature & Health, there were more similarities than differences. Both magazines promote pragmatism, authenticity and critical engagement as key values inscribed within the “will to health”: pragmatism privileges responsible modes of information or resource consumption; authenticity expands the limits of beauty culture; and critical engagement resists the reproduction of normative beliefs and representations.

In combination, these values constitute the ideal subject of women’s health magazines through a cultural politics that is well suited to neoliberal ideology. As Ann Robertson has observed, “particular discourses on health emerge at particular historical moments and gain widespread acceptance primarily because they are more or less congruent with the prevailing
social, political and economic order within which they are produced, maintained and reproduced” (2001, pp. 294--295). It is the complementarity between health and neoliberalism that points to how the discourses of pragmatism, authenticity and critical engagement are implicated within global biopolitics, including the deregulation of financial markets, the devolution of state responsibilities and global flows of people, technologies and information. To return to the Nikolas Rose quote provided at the beginning of the paper, “the health-related aspirations and conduct of individuals is governed ‘at a distance’, by shaping the ways they understand and enact their own freedom” (2001, p. 6). Or in the words of Mariana Valverde, “freedom has become, in the mass democracies of the twentieth century, the primary programme of governance. We are governed not against but through our freedom’ (1998, p. 17). While there may be many social benefits to encouraging independence, self-belief and critical thought in magazine audiences, Rose and Valverde remind us that this is not in itself a path to “freedom”.

There is, however, a possibility for these discourses to be turned in on themselves, to begin to question who benefits from the “will to health”? Health magazines may be guilty of shaping magazine publics to fit market, gender and political norms but they are also capable of opening up public discourse to a more contextual appreciation of the social, economic and political conditions that shape health. There is much potential, therefore, for scholars working in feminist media studies to develop new ways of exploring how health media audiences make sense of the commercial expansion of health markets, the cultural trends in health and medicine, and the connections between individual practice and global biopolitics, and also how they may envision future developments in health and medicine.
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