



THE
VAGENDA

A ZERO TOLERANCE
GUIDE TO THE
MEDIA

**Holly Baxter &
Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett**

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About the Book

As students, Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett and Holly Baxter spent a lot of time laughing at newspaper and magazine articles entitled things like '50 Sex Tips to Please Your Man'. Particularly the ones that encouraged bringing baked goods into the bedroom, or instructed on how to remove cellulite from your arse using coffee granules.

But when they stopped laughing, they started to feel a bit uneasy.

Was this relentless hum about vajazzles and fat removal just daft, at worse a bit patronising - or was something more disturbing going on?

Was it time to say NO?
No, this really isn't OK.
In fact, IT'S A LOAD OF BULLSH*T!

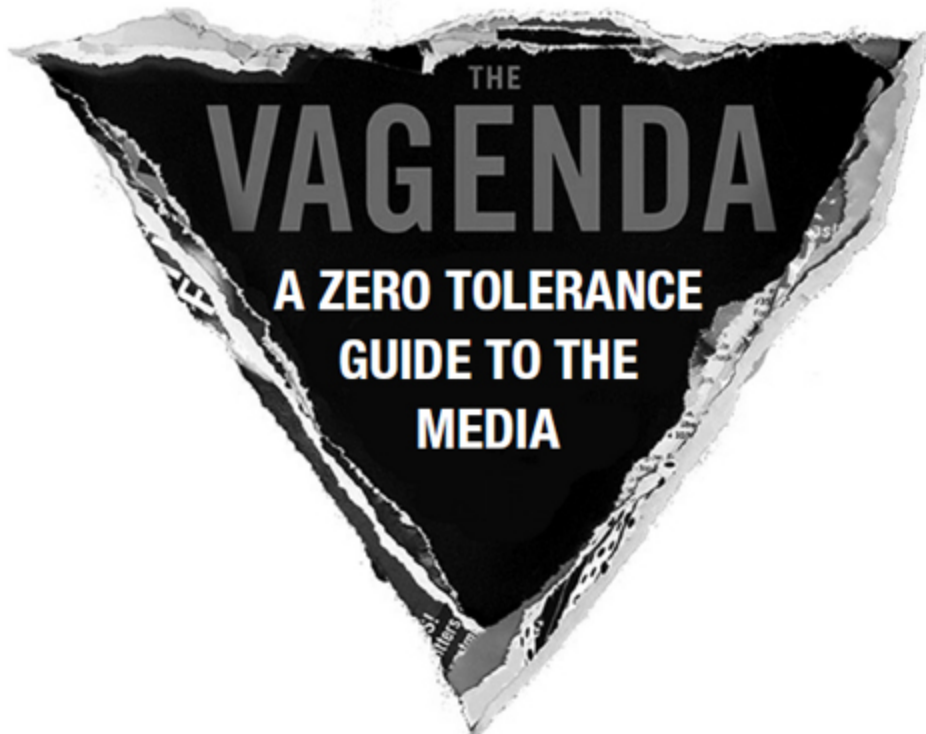
They thought so. So they launched *The Vagenda* blog in 2012, and now they have written this laugh-out-loud book. *The Vagenda* is a brilliantly bolshy rallying call to girls and women of all ages. Caitlin Moran asked 'How to be a Woman': *The Vagenda* asks real women everywhere to demand a media that reflects who we actually are.

About the Authors

Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett and Holly Baxter co-founded *The Vagenda* in February 2012. It was a viral sensation and instant hit and received over 7 million views in its first year. Caitlin Moran described it as 'Really funny, like really funny'; Eva Wiseman said 'I like this... keep doing what you're doing'; Rosamund Urwin said 'Go to their site, it's brilliant' and Jenny Éclair said 'I'm so glad you're here'. Rhiannon and Holly are journalists in their twenties. They live in London.

To our mums, for their unwavering emotional support; and
to our dads, for their technical support.
We could not ask for better or more hilarious parents.

Holly Baxter & Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett



📱 SQUARE PEG

Introduction

What's a girl to do?

(or, How we realised between cocktails that there was something very wrong in Magazineland)

Back in February 2012, a pair of impoverished graduates launched a blog dedicated to humorously lambasting women's magazines. We called it 'The Vagenda', a term we stole from a broadsheet article about women in the workplace with a hidden agenda. Of all the stupid portmanteau terms we had come across while reading magazines - manthropology, shoemageddon, hiberdating - 'vagenda' was the most ridiculous. And we found not only that the amalgamation of 'vagina' and 'agenda' was pleasing to the ear, but that the word perfectly encapsulated the aims of the blog: to expose the silly, manipulative and sometimes damaging ulterior motives of women's magazines.

We were experts only insofar as we had consumed an awful lot of glossy trash over the years - glossy trash that had been telling us how to look, think and behave since we first left the local newsagent's clutching a copy of *Mizz* in our sweaty little sherbet-covered fingers. Women buy thousands upon thousands of magazines each year, and, despite the advent of the internet and, for some publications, tanking circulation figures, they remain extremely popular. It's said that women look at between 400 and 600 adverts a day, and with the ratio of advertorial to editorial in magazines rapidly increasing, that number is

likely to rise. Magazines' editorial content and the adverts that target you with age-specific products alongside it (lip gloss for tweens, padded bras for teenagers, plastic surgery for twentysomethings, overpriced 'shabby-chic' sideboards and Le Creuset kitchen paraphernalia for the middle-aged cohort) have been an unavoidable part of the female consciousness for most women raised in the Western world since the 1930s.

Even publications that used to celebrate women's liberation in the seventies and eighties have been increasingly watered down and replaced with easily recycled, oversexed content pandering to an advertising team who've got your money on their mind. Nowadays, it can feel as if their index fingers are pointing accusingly at you from behind the page, primed to deliver you a hefty shot of insecurity to complement your morning Botox.

As tweenagers, we graduated from the romance comics, spooky stories and 'I kissed a boy during my first period, am I pregnant?' problem pages in *Shout*, *Mizz*, *Sugar* or *Jackie*, dependent on your age, to those with a more mature demographic such as *Just Seventeen* (later rebranded as *J-17*). For our own generation, *J-17* (which everyone knows you read when you were 13 and hid from your scandalised mother, lest she find the bit about 69ing) was the go-to magazine for sex advice, trading as it did primarily in information and revelations about boys in the same way that *Jackie* traded in romance and engagement stories in the 1970s. But these sorts of stories have a sell-by date, and by the time you're a teenager, you're being steered headlong into *Cosmopolitan*, *Company* and *Grazia*. An addiction that lasts a lifetime is born. We haven't got past our twenties yet, but we're looking forward to the terrifying content of 'mature' magazines such as *Red* and *Easy Living* ('Do his sperm hate your vagina?' 'Will your consumption of guacamole affect your fertility?' 'Is off-white a suitably calming colour for the nursery of a baby with

“unconventional sleeping patterns”) Alongside all this, the celebrity magazine grew to gargantuan proportions throughout the noughties. Where once *Hello!* and *OK!* stood slightly shamefacedly in the corner of the news racks, *heat*, *Closer* and a variety of other younger sisters now jostle for room, emanating a combination of disjointed newzac and bilious body snark like the cidered-up drunk on your corner. ‘Is it a baby or a burrito? Our experts decide!’ scream headlines next to a magnified image of Celebrity X’s stomach. ‘Celebrity Y breaks down over unbearable pressure from paparazzi!’ proclaims the next headline, with a blurry picture of said celeb’s hand across a lens as ironic illustration. On the face of it, you wouldn’t think that that sort of banal content would reel in a substantial audience – yet we fall for it again and again.

If Page Three is the sexist builder hollering at you in the street, then *Grazia* and *Cosmo* are the frenemies who smile to your face and bitch behind your back. It worried us that women such as us, reared on a diet beginning with problem-page questions about tampons in *Bliss* magazine and graduating on to *Company*, weren’t being offered any of the necessary critical tools to deal with increasingly sinister content. There comes a certain point (probably around the time that you’ve picked up your tenth issue of *Cosmopolitan*) when your brain is encased in such a large volume of fluffy bullshit that you switch off and start thinking, ‘My elbows are fat. You’re right, *Cosmo*, they are really bloody fat,’ as you stare at the latest photoshopped model. Open up one of these rags and you’ll be confronted with a tirade of mixed messages: an article about women having a lower sex drive than men, followed by a problem page in which a man complains that his girlfriend is always gagging for it, for example. In the case of the latter, the agony aunt’s response to the gentleman in question is naturally that his missus is definitely, definitely a nymphomaniac and needs therapy as a matter of urgency.

Such contradictory material is enough to drive a woman to drink. One minute you're being told to love your body and embrace it as the imperfect vessel that it is, and the next you're manically rubbing coffee granules into your arse cellulite instead of drinking them in your morning latte (which, by the way, makes you fat).

You'll also face a constant deluge of articles which supposedly question what it is, and isn't, OK to do (Can I sleep around? Can I eat carbs? Can I shave my pubes and still believe in feminism/world peace/string theory?) Rather than reassure you that you can do all these things and that you should stop worrying about them, the editorial staff continue to busy themselves setting up fictitious taboos ('Proposing - his job or yours?') which just serve to make you even more worried about your already hellishly hectic life. Many of you will be familiar with the 'Hey, it's OK' section of *Glamour* magazine, which features 'jokey' reassurances related to modes of behaviour deemed typical of all females. Yet rather than saying, 'Hey, it's OK that you don't want a baby,' or, 'Hey, it's OK that you don't have the time or inclination to shave your legs between October and April, if at all,' or even (God forbid) 'Hey, it's OK to eat carbs,' they rely instead on crass, deliberately uncontroversial generalisation. So it's 'Hey, it's OK to dish the dirt on your sex life to all of your friends but convince yourself he'd never do the same to his,' or 'Hey, it's OK to browse the babywear section even if you don't have a baby' (both real-life examples from April 2013). What's a girl to do?

It was high time, we felt, that we took it on. The Vagenda aimed to shine a critical light on women's media, moving from piss-takes of the most ridiculous sex tips in *Cosmopolitan*, to why the female celebrity is always painted in the same way by tabloids, to the ongoing media obsession with female diet and beauty. As our readership grew, we began to address much broader issues affecting

women's lives, from maternity leave to the under-representation of women editors in the media and the depressing prevalence of ultra-violent porn. Our starting point was the magazine world, but as we dug deeper we saw that the dysfunctional habits of *Glamour* and *Grazia* were reflected and repeated in film and TV, on billboards and in advertising, throughout newspapers and across mainstream websites. That is why this book predominantly criticises women's magazines, but also makes mention of the surrounding media that influence them, and vice versa.

Almost as soon as we launched, hordes of women, from the age of 13 right up to 85, were getting in touch and wanting to add their voices. The Vagenda has now covered everything from the weave to the vajazzle, miscarriage to motherhood, the position of women in the workplace to the position of the fortnight. We've done this with the help and contributions of women (and men) from all over the world. They got in touch to point and laugh and rant and rave at the ridiculous media stereotypes that surrounded them, whether they were university freshers, new mothers, or engineers at the start of their career, and the response was humbling. It made us realise that we weren't the only ones who felt like crap when we read women's magazines or watched MTV.

A study by Bradley University in Illinois in 2012 found that just three minutes spent looking at a fashion magazine led to 70% of women feeling 'guilty, depressed, and shameful'. Similarly, the University of Missouri- Columbia conducted a survey involving 81 women and found that, after three minutes of looking at images of fashion models, all of them felt worse about themselves, regardless of size, weight, age or height.¹ When *Seventeen* magazine was first published in 1944, the average model was around 5 ft 7 in. and weighed 130 lb (9 stone 3). These days, the average model is 5 ft 11 in. and weighs 115 lb (8 stone 2). It's a

pretty drastic change. Since the mid-twentieth century, the bikini-body ideal has done a complete 180, with women then being implored to 'gain 10 to 25 lb the easy way' in the same way that they are now being told to lose it. Looking at an advertisement from that period really hammers things home. 'How do you look in a bathing suit?' it demands, illustrating its message with two female figures. The very slender woman looks demonstrably unhappy, while the smiling Monroe-esque 'ideal' woman of the age is well pleased with herself. Yet, looking at such images now, it's the former type which would be lauded as the ultimate ideal, while the latter would be consigned to the plus-size section. In other words, the goalposts are always shifting, and women are continually expected to live up to some form of arbitrarily decided 'ideal body'.

There's no doubt that all this obsessive body monitoring is having a negative impact on our self-esteem, but it's not just our physical appearance that is under scrutiny. This book looks at how the media attempt to dictate everything from your bikini wax to your body language, your diet to your 'sex moves', your pants to your personality, and we hope that you come to see it as something of a survival guide. Because it's high time we all called bullshit.

1

Women's Magazines

Where did it all go wrong?

WHAT TO READ: A GOOD WIFE'S GUIDE

In the beginning, there was the home-making magazine. Back then, 'woman' was synonymous with 'wife', so you moved quickly from children's stories to magazines that taught you how to cook a loaf from scratch without annoying your husband too much. This fairly accurately reflected how life was for women in the 1700s, when these manuals started to emerge: childhood, then the next fifty or so years as willing domestic servant and mother. Often, these magazines weren't actually targeted solely at women – they were 'family editions', with a section for children and sometimes even helpful hints for the hubby. Because books weren't as easily available as they are now and the internet was a mere twinkle in someone's great-grandfather's eye, these publications also used to print chapters of popular fiction for the family (in 1897, *Cosmopolitan* serialised *War of the Worlds*. Seriously).

The first British women's magazine was launched in 1693. It was called *The Ladies' Mercury*, and, like its male counterparts, it operated out of a coffee house. Unlike its male counterparts, however, it preoccupied itself with relationship problems, promising to answer readers'

queries about 'Love, etc'. It only lasted for four issues, but it was the first time that 'women' as a special-interest category existed in the journalism world. The altogether more successful *Lady's Magazine*, which first appeared in 1770, was targeted at the upper echelons of society and reflected their presumed interests: royalty, and sentimental stories. No home-making tips here - leave that to the staff - but lots of titillation on offer, in the form of 'romantic fiction' which invariably involved the (chastely expressed) deflowering of a virgin. These two types of magazine and their content were beginning to merge by the mid-nineteenth century, with the creation of a much larger middle class. Samuel Beeton's *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, for example, featured fiction but also domestic advice on such varied subjects as 'How to treat dysentery' and the best way to stew liver. Not long afterwards, the bodice-rippers like those found in the *Lady's Magazine* were cosying up next to gardening advice, and in the mid-nineteenth century the fashion plates joined them. The *Lady's Magazine* even featured a 'Cupid's Post Bag' page that dispensed romantic advice, which for a brief period featured erotic missives about the sexual thrill of a tightly laced corset. The *Englishwoman's Journal*, meanwhile, campaigned for women to be allowed to train in various professions, though only in the absence of a male provider, and was decidedly undomestic in this respect.

In the 1890s women entered the world of journalism in record numbers, and not just as magazine contributors (often unpaid novices and ladies of leisure) but also to work for the women's pages in newspapers. According to Anne O'Hagan, one of the 'Hen Coop' assigned to a small room in the offices of Hearst's New-York-based *Evening Journal*, these sections were 'sacred to currant jam and current gossip'.² She noted, sarcastically: 'No woman is ever mentioned on a "woman's page" who is not, if not

transcendently beautiful, at least gifted with “a charm of manner all her own”. No actress is there whose home life is not of a sort to gladden every mother’s heart. No woman lawyer or doctor is anything but “deliciously feminine.””

CURVES OF YOUTH
will be yours if you will
“Pull the Cords”

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Flesh the
Resiliency
and
Freshness
of
Youth

PROF.
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Femininity was exactly what editors were looking for when they hired women journalists to provide the ‘woman’s angle’ on news stories. Female reporters who wrote human-interest stories – the emotive, ‘soft’ side of the masculine ‘hard’ news – were dubbed ‘sob sisters’, and feature writers were expected to occupy themselves primarily with the four F’s: family, food, fashion and furnishings.

By the turn of the century, the number of magazines targeted at women had doubled: some survivors of that era include *Harper’s Bazaar*, *The Lady* (from 1885), and *Woman’s Weekly*, which was launched in 1911 to meet the demand of newly office-employed women. Its content combined ‘real-life romance’ stories (the first ever edition

featured a man recounting how he ‘fell in love over a bath chair’) with cookery tips and knitting patterns, demonstrating the merge of the upper-class women’s publication and the working woman’s ‘family manual’ into a new kind of magazine altogether. *Woman’s Weekly*, for instance, was in 1915 combining advice on how to get rid of ‘salt cellars’ (an old-fashioned term for bingo wings) with tips on how to become a ‘lady detective’.

There were more risqué efforts, too, such as *Freewoman*, a feminist weekly founded in the same year as *Woman’s Weekly* which, as well as the usual topics of housework and motherhood, also covered the movement for women’s suffrage. WH Smith refused to stock it on the grounds that it was ‘disgusting’ and ‘immoral’. In contrast, working-class women had fiction magazines which serialised romantic melodramas involving steamy transgressions of class boundaries.

After the First World War, editors started to realise there was money to be made from a new kind of independent woman. Bizarrely enough, some of the magazines published in the 1920s (the era of the new breed of chain-smoking, Charleston-dancing, sexually liberated flapper girls) seem progressive even by today’s standards. A copy of *Modern Woman* from 1925 includes an article called ‘Life is sweet, sister’ that reads like a manifesto for female liberation. ‘I doubt whether any other period of women’s history could show a time when it’s so wonderful to be alive,’ it begins, before continuing with, ‘What sweeter money is there than money you earn yourself?’ and, ‘There’s nothing like a good job and your own regular income to keep your mind happy.’ It also contains early prototypes of the same beauty advertisements that you’d see in today’s magazines, but nevertheless puts forward a vision of womanhood that’s altogether much more multifaceted, featuring fiction and theatre reviews alongside cookery and interior decoration.

In the late 1930s, publications such as *Woman* encouraged women to look outside the home and into their communities. They showed flickers of feminism, discussing double standards on smoking (something considered by men to be 'uncouth' in a woman) and asking why it was that women had to wear skirts. *Woman* magazine even asked for flexible working hours for mothers. For a brief period in the interwar years, it looked as though women were gaining serious ground.

However, after the war many women who had achieved financial independence were ousted from the jobs they'd had during wartime and sent back into the kitchen to make way for the returning soldiers. While *Modern Woman* was still taking a forward-thinking stance (in February 1946 it ran an article celebrating 'our 24', the number of women in parliament at the time, which said, 'All 24 have something to offer - what woman hasn't?'), other magazines were well on their way to becoming the home-making bibles we associate with the 1950s.

The magazines of the 1950s provided an aspirational 'dream world' for those who had experienced rationing and poverty. Like the Victorian 'angel in the house', the 1950s housewife perfected her art with the use of a manual which dispensed helpful domestic tips. What differed was the sheer range of new commercial goods available to the housewife, who became a target for advertisers. Suddenly, fridges, washing machines and electric ovens had become an affordable option, and they freed up a huge amount of time previously wasted in domestic drudgery. (No wonder *Mad Men's* resident housewife Betty Draper mounted hers.) These darlings of the domestic world dominated the pages of magazines to the extent that their adverts started to affect editorial content for the first time. In 1956 the first advertising 'arrangement' took place when a nylon manufacturer booked \$12,000 worth of space in the US

edition of *Woman*, and the editor agreed not to publish anything about natural fibres in the issue.

According to Katharine Whitehorn, the function of women's magazines was to 'teach women how to be perfect', with adverts sending the message that 'they would be perfect only if they used the product'.³ Full-colour page spreads started to appear in *Woman* in 1956, a precursor of today's glossies. In the same period, magazine readership skyrocketed, and competition was so fierce that an article in *The Economist* referred to the market as 'the petticoat battleground'.

Magazines like *Good Housekeeping* enjoyed storming success as the go-to rags for fifties housewives in need of domestic tips: '101 decorating ideas', 'Clothes to make a new baby', and 'How do you measure up against the stars?' ran alongside recipes (Spam suppers, 'Bacon Cookery Special'), adverts for new 'life-changing' home appliances; and girdles (tagline: 'Because you insist on freedom'), and tapeworm diets ('Eat! Eat! Eat! & always stay slim!'). And, of course, endless flower arranging torture, as illustrated by a ten-page 'Summer Flower Arranging Special' from May 1955. 'The good wife's guide' which ran in *Housekeeping Monthly* in the same year instructed its readers: 'Remember: his topics of conversation are more important than yours', 'You have no right to question him', and 'A good wife always knows her place'. All of these catered specifically to an audience of housebound females.

It should go without saying that the more time you spend bored at home, the more stuff you're likely to buy, making advertising in these magazines extremely lucrative for the average business. Tailoring content to a solely female readership was turning out to be such a good idea that more women - lots of them - had to be hired full-time by the publications to keep relevant content churning. But aspiring journalists weren't the only ones to embrace the

increase in employment opportunities: more and more women were entering the workplace, and that meant they'd be spending much less time bored off their tits buying consumer items such as household goods, and much more time being bold and busy in the office. Gradually, women's magazines, with their staid domesticity, started to look hopelessly out of step. They didn't speak to the 'new woman', who was often unmarried and in employment. A new selling tactic would have to be used as a way of getting them to spend their money at the same rate as housewives. As Naomi Wolf explains, there was a 'transfer of guilt' as anxieties about household dirt transformed into anxieties about physical appearance.⁴ Baking tips weren't going to cut it in the age of independence; the beauty industry needed to step in. As Wolf puts it, we'll buy more things if we are kept in the 'self-hating, ever-failing, hungry, and sexually insecure state of being aspiring "beauties".' In fact, the more supposedly liberated women became, the more they were confronted with articles such as 'Want a new nose? Complete information' (*Cosmo*, October 1963) and 'Legs a man can't forget - they can be yours' (*Cosmo*, April 1963).

In the 1960s, women's liberation and 'free love' changed Magazineland. *She* was the first magazine that made no attempt to target a specific group of 'housewives' or 'career gals' but instead aimed to appeal to women across the board. It had been launched in 1955 but came into its own in the sixties, by publishing a mixture of social commentary, politics, and tongue-in-cheek articles such as 'Weight-lifting for bust-lifting', 'Your old banger: how to make it last', and 'Womb music: once heard, never forgotten'. The similarly refreshing *Nova* launched in 1965 and, like *She*, its intended readership was wide: a 'new magazine for a new kind of woman', whether or not she was married, employed, university-educated or a mother. A

typical cover of the time was *Nova's* 'Yes, we're living in sin. No, we're not getting married. Why? It's out of date.' Instead of targeting people by social class or income, the new women's publication targeted according to attitude. And that attitude was becoming increasingly liberal.

'NO ONE LIKES A POOR GIRL' - The *Cosmo* Girl is born

As women became increasingly distanced from the home, rates of magazine consumption, which had been so high in the 1950s, started to fall dramatically, and someone needed to turn this around. *Cosmopolitan* was remodelled in 1965, and turned from a 'family read' to the gal's handbag companion that we might recognise today. Helen Gurley Brown, the new editor, who had just written a wildly successful pulling manual called *Sex and the Single Girl*, would stay with *Cosmo* for thirty-two years. With her perfectly manicured hand at the helm, and a new focus on gaining the readership of the independent, 'fun, fearless female', features like 'Favourite toys for little Timmy' morphed into juicier versions such as 'Meet Timmy, your favourite toy boy'. Magazines like *Good Housekeeping* were rapidly becoming the exception rather than the rule. The beauty industry tightened its stranglehold, with the number of diet articles rising by 70% from 1968 to 1972, and there was an increasing focus on sex. *Cosmo* articles from the time include 'World's greatest lover - what it was like to be wooed by him' (July 1965), 'The 600 calorie diet to make you skinny without hysterics' (November 1974), and 'Morals, ethics and that *Cosmo* Girl: how far out can (and should) she go?' (February 1975).

Brown believed in 'sex without shame', and the *Cosmo* Girl was absolutely synonymous with the liberated woman

of the sixties. She didn't wait for a husband to turn up on a white horse, fill her up with babies and stick her in the kitchen with a fondue set. She had boyfriends and 'lived in sin', had one-night stands and enjoyed them, and even dipped her toe into the pool of married men, all the while looking perfectly turned out and permanently euphoric (think *Mad Men's* Joan Holloway). *Cosmo* also ran advice on how to set up home alone ('The perfect apartment for that Cosmopolitan Girl' - October 1970), on managing your money, and on how to know your cystitis from your polycystic ovaries. Its message was revolutionary in its time, positioning men as complementary to a woman's life rather than central to it (and it still is, compared with the airbrushed pages of today's *Cosmo*). But it claimed to provide a more palatable, less threatening, 'sexy feminist' alternative to what Brown termed the 'dour, angry feminism' of the time.

Because while Brown had been revolutionising *Cosmopolitan*, something else had been going on in the magazine racks of everyone's local corner shop. Overtly feminist magazines enjoyed their salad days in the seventies and eighties. One of the best examples of these was *Spare Rib*, which was launched in 1972 by a collective including Rosie Boycott and Marsha Rowe. It was an important self-described 'women's liberation magazine'. Though it featured many of the most pertinent debates of the time, the humour was thin on the ground; presumably aware of this, its own editorial team once ran a feature called 'Why is this magazine so depressing?'

WH Smith, ever the pusher of boundaries, refused to stock *Spare Rib* because of its explicit content and its edgy rejection of gender norms ('A woman doesn't have to be a virgin, wife or mother'), giving the feminist publication a certain underground appeal. When Rhiannon's granddad went into a bookshop and asked for a copy for his daughter,

a confused store clerk imagined a very different kind of young woman and redirected him to the cookery section.

Spare Rib ceased publication in 1993, just as consumerism reached fever pitch and political commentary in women's magazines all but disappeared for ever. *Ms.* magazine, the monthly liberal feminist magazine launched by American feminist Gloria Steinem in the same year, continues to this day, though it is now quarterly.

Many other women's mags took *Spare Rib's* lead, interspersing their make-up tips with articles about career progression and equal pay. Along with the women's sections of newspapers, magazines such as *Woman* and *Woman's Own* were playing a crucial part in the feminist revolution. They took many of the themes covered by the feminist press - 'battered wives', the unfair division of domestic labour, sexual harassment, and equal pay - and tailored them to a mainstream audience. Suddenly the war was being fought from kitchens and laundry rooms up and down the country. What looked like a harmless, fluffy women's magazine being read directly under a husband's nose was actually encouraging his wife to demand equality in every sphere.

By the 1970s, women were picking up *Cosmo* and its little sister *Company* in their droves. Both magazines paid homage to feminism in the form of a sassy, assertive individualism while still retaining their sexy consumerist focus, with articles such as 'How to be a millionairess' (*Company*) and 'Lose weight in bed - the lovemaker's diet' (*Cosmo*). The teen market that *Company* tapped into had been established by *Honey* in 1960, and since then had seen a boom in readership. Popular teen magazine *Jackie* saw its sales rise from an initial 350,000 readers at its launch in 1964 to 605,000 in 1976. It struggled to compete with the racier *Just Seventeen*, which was launched in 1983 and, despite its demise in 2004, probably remains the most influential teen magazine ever created.

But by the end of the eighties, the 'campaigning magazine' had been all but swallowed up by the much raunchier glossies, as well as the more high-end fashion magazines such as *Vogue*, *Marie Claire* (launched in the UK in 1988 with an average circulation of 195,000) and *Elle* (1985). As for *Cosmo*, by the eighties and nineties, any pretence of feminism had been fully overshadowed by raunch, with features such as 'Why liberated couples drive each other crazy' (September 1983) and 'When too much sex is not enough' (August 1992).

Helen Gurley Brown had set a precedent for the magazines that were to succeed - and the direction was confusing and often self-contradictory. She told women to take the shame out of sex, and to plan their careers around themselves rather than around their future husbands, but under her editorship, *Cosmo* tips for single women revolved around how to get a man, and bedroom tips focused on how to please him, even in the articles featuring in the so-called 'feminist' *Cosmo* of the 1970s and '80s: 'What I want in a wife', 'Things to say in bed', 'What your legs say about you', and 'Twenty ways to make him come on strong'. While apparently every girl has it in her to 'Smock around the clock' (yes, really), not everyone, according to *Cosmo*, is 'thin enough for a thong'. *Cosmo*'s 'please your man' to please your advertisers message intensified throughout the nineties and noughties, until the magazine ended up where it is today: a publication hell-bent on perfecting your body for the sex he wants. The *Cosmo* Girl didn't have to be an angry feminist with armpit hair, but suddenly what she *did* have to be was a shaven, shiny babe right down to her Sloggis, spending her Saturday night in complicated lingerie becoming proficient at a striptease, or coordinating her look with the boyfriend she wants to attract. (A common feature has men lining up and judging a female celebrity's dress style, so you can find out in advance of

your trip down to H&M whether Keith from Coventry prefers high-waisted jeans or hotpants.)

But what had pushed boundaries in the sixties became a tedious reiteration of the status quo a few decades later. *Cosmo* began pumping out the same boring conveyor-belt content every month, often borrowed from previous issues of years before, or from other magazines: one 2013 feature asking whether you're having a 'normal' amount of sex had already run in a 1987 edition of *Bella* ('Making love - how often is normal?'). Gurley Brown herself was a woman of contradictions who celebrated the 'fake look' with almost admirable tenacity, both through public advocacy and private choice - she even wrote an article about how to remain beautiful during sex while wearing a hairpiece. She may not be solely responsible for what happened to the women's magazines we now consume, but her own contradictory attitudes towards women go a good way to explaining the inconsistencies that her longtime publication came to suffer from.

There is some irony in the fact that *Cosmo* turned the magazine market around. Before it, unmarried women had been largely ignored by other publications, which were considered to be the domain of men. *Cosmo's* highly sexual content paved the way for a variety of imitators, most notably the now-defunct *more!*, a magazine that catered to self-identified teenage 'ladettes'. Magazines such as *Minx* prided themselves on their sexual frankness and targeted 'young, assertive, rather scary young women' who 'don't buy women's magazines'. But their raunchy content led to battles with advertisers, who weren't really fans of the groundbreaking work *Minx* was doing on subjects like female ejaculation (according to an ex-employee, an article on this was sent back with strict instructions to 'go away and de-quim it'), and this blighted the publication. It eventually folded in 2000, due to falling circulation. The journalist Polly Vernon, who wrote for *Minx*, felt it was

different to the 'silly, vacant, extravagant and often cruel' (*Guardian*, 3 July 2000) magazines out there. She now works for *Grazia*.

Throughout the late nineties and early noughties, plastic surgery advertorial became increasingly common, even for magazines preaching 'body confidence'. In this newly aggressive landscape, magazines seemed to want to provoke insecurities in their readers by encouraging them to buy into a certain body ideal, then selling that insecurity on to advertisers for financial gain in the most insidious way. They sought an upwardly mobile, young, aspirational readership for this very purpose: it was a readership that was easy to sell to advertisers. *Glamour* magazine, which was launched by Condé Nast in the UK in 2001 as a pioneer of the 'handbag-sized' format and continues to be the bestselling women's monthly, produced a brochure for advertisers which seeks to describe this highly sought after readership: 'With an average age of 27, these readers are upmarket, high spending and aspirational or upwardly mobile, and with lots of disposable income.' It continues: 'They buy a fashion item every eight days and a beauty product every nine days. They take holidays twice a year and need a glamorous car to project their personality and get them around their busy lives.' In short:

Glamour is

For successful, independent modern women who know how to have fun, how to dress, and how to spend

They do: shopping, friends, bars, travel

They don't: window shop, stay at home, have a problem spending

They buy: clothes, shoes, make-up and jewellery. Their vices? A new handbag every month for each new issue of *Glamour*

They are: ABC12 women aged 18-34.

'*Glamour, The Philosophy and Profile*', cited by Rosalind Gill in *Gender and the Media*. (2007)

For us, the *Glamour* profile is ironic considering we bought the magazine when we were at our most skint and living off 15p instant noodles, but it makes fascinating

reading. Furthermore, its emphasis on female beauty has remained steadfastly the same, as demonstrated by the fact that in May 1958 the US edition was running articles such as 'What to wear with what to be pretty', and in February 2012 it opted for the slightly screechier but nonetheless identical 'We're all going to be soooooo pretty!' Still, we suppose that's better reading than their damning tragic spinster exposé of January 1972, entitled 'What it's like to be 27 and unmarried'.

Cosmo appeals to a similar demographic to *Glamour*, though, according to Jan Adcock, *Cosmo's* publishing director until 2007, 'It's not an age thing, it's an attitude thing ... it's glamorous and sexy, and it's about success - some people are scared of that, at whatever age.' It's hard to reconcile this independence with the ideal *Cosmo* Girl you can catch a glimpse of on the Hearst digital website, a woman who 'follows celebrities and emulates their style', but then that's the fundamental contradiction. The 1990s saw forthright, sassy, feminist-lite content that lauded independence, juxtaposed with rather anti-feminist advertising. Naomi Wolf pointed out that women's magazines have split personalities, but the conflict between serious, pro-women content and advertising that she wrote of in 1990 has now largely become irrelevant: advertisers have truly won the battle.

It started to seem as though the only way these women's magazines could survive in this cold, capitalist world was to make sure that their readership felt just insecure enough to keep buying issue after issue. In 2012 there was a bit of a stir about whether we'd all gone wrong. As *Cosmo's* fortieth birthday approached and blogs that mocked its content became popular, the powers-that-be in Cosmopolitan Towers launched The F Word campaign to 'bring feminism back'. Celebrities came out in tight-fitting T-shirts proclaiming, 'We use the F word, do you?' while doing duckface and/or bedroom eyes to the camera.

Despite the fact that feminism has nothing to do with what you're wearing on your genitals, a debate they held at the Women of the World Festival in 2012 was entitled 'Can you be a feminist and vajazzle?' Hard-hitting stuff, we're sure you'll agree.

CELEB-BASHING AND YOU

But woman cannot dine on vajazzles alone. A new kind of magazine had burst on to the scene in the nineties to threaten the behemoth that was *Cosmo*: the celeb magazine. By the noughties it dominated the news-stands – so much so that it's hard to believe this phenomenon actually crash-landed on the British landscape relatively late. While France had had *Paris Match* since 1949 and Spain *¡Hola!* since 1944, *Hello!* only reached British shores in 1988, with *OK!* following in 1993. Before being hounded by the paparazzi became a full-time occupation, the stories that appeared in the celeb-watching rags such as *Hello!* were often directly endorsed by the respective celebrity's PRs. 'C-List Celeb shows off her hand-sewn leather pouffe by the pool, available under her own label from John Lewis,' an article might read, accompanied by a grinning portrait of said C-Lister and her three beautiful children. Sure, the glowing profiles of the celebrities in these pages might now and then raise a little cynicism, but you basically knew what you were getting when you slipped a copy of *OK!* into your shopping trolley on a guilty Saturday stock-up. Solid gold trash, with the celeb seal of approval and the willing, cosy collusion of some PR execs and their friends in journalism.

By the late nineties, society's celebrity obsession was in full swing. Weeklies *Closer*, *Now*, *Reveal*, *New* and *heat* all followed, with some boasting enormous circulation figures

(as of 2004, *heat* was read by half a million people every week). New-kid-on-the-block *Grazia* (launched in 2005) became as beloved of the British public as its 'generic women's mag' counterparts like *Cosmo*, *Company* and *Elle*.

But as celeb mags became a bigger deal, public figures started biting back at the idea of having their children photographed building their first sandcastle and started going to court to try to prevent the media from publishing their most private and often shameful stories. And lo! the age of the super-injunction was upon us. It turns out that having enough money can secure the protection of the court as the papers are about to reveal your sleazy extramarital affair, just in the nick of time. The rise of the super-injunction showed just how irrational celebrity magazines and tabloids had become as they got a taste of real popularity. Back in the early noughties, when everyone was still somewhat blasé about a cheeky up-skirt shot if you ran away quickly enough, one paparazzo was found at the christening of Madonna's son, having hidden in the cathedral organ for over 24 hours and pooing in a bin bag. He almost got away with a film of just under half an hour, before security guards found him sneaking out. This was the year when *Celebrity Big Brother* aired for the first time. The lens of the pap was becoming a ubiquitous symbol of fame and its consequences. By 2012 – just over a decade later – our own royal family was suing some of the most determined celebrity photographers for invading the privacy of a family holiday between Prince William and his then-new bride Kate Middleton by snapping topless photos of her.

Women suffered the most at the hands of these dogged photographers. The paps knew very well that a snap of K-Middy's breasts would sell like hot cakes – and despite the great pro-royal loyalty of the British press who promised not to buy and publish those particular photos, the pesky celeb mag counterparts in other countries weren't quite so

protective. Of course, this wasn't the first time a scantily clad lass had been shamed by the press, but it was a boundary-pushing moment. Alongside the Leveson Inquiry – which had exposed phone hacking and other dodgy journalistic practices that showed the depths to which some hacks would sink to get their story – it told consumers what they were really buying into when they flicked through a full-colour 'source reveals all' article on this month's top model. And in many ways, once some official hand-wringing was over, the magazines themselves stopped pretending that they had any real integrity, and continued going hell-for-leather to procure the best snap of Former Child Star X's neon thong as she slipped out of the nearest limousine.

As the decade progressed, the tabloids starting getting in on the act and coverage of female celebrities increasingly became focused on their bodies and their flaws. The *Daily Mail* and the Femail section of its website – which by 2010 had become the most popular news website in the *entire world*, a title it certainly hasn't relinquished at the time of writing – regularly used its infamous 'sidebar of shame' to present a tasty variety of body-shaming tactics every time a famous woman left the house. (Once they wrote five articles in a single day on Lady Gaga's perceived weight gain; perceived, that is, by one of their own reporters.) If a nipple slipped, a muffin top wobbled, or a pair of particularly chiselled cheekbones got caught at a dramatic angle, according to the 'sidebar of shame' the woman in question was a slut, a fatty or an anorexic.

Sweat patches on T-shirts, too-obvious tit tape and hairs out of place were gleefully pointed out in such classy ways as via *heat's* 'circle of shame' or 'hoop of horror', which highlighted the offending body part with the undisguised mocking sneer of a school bully on coke. The ratio of males to females in the 'circle of shame' feature is undeniably skewed.