

## MAGAZINE FEATURES AND INFOTAINMENT VALUES

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### Abstract

*The determinants which privilege selection of articles for mass market women's magazines have been little investigated. Conventionally, the articles are seen to convey information didactically in the service sections and entertain through the feature stories. Many feature stories combine information and human interest to produce a hybrid form of article. This paper appropriates the term 'infotainment' to describe them. It draws on health articles to develop an argument about infotainment values as they operate in mass market Australian magazines, identifying nine determining characteristics and suggesting that they can be found more widely.*

Magazine scholarship is still a minor part of the field of media studies and there are few studies which consider magazines generally as a medium with particular forms, practices and genres of content. Jenny McKay's UK study comes closest, looking at magazines as a reasonably unified field, but does so principally as a guide to would-be journalists (2000). Book-length studies customarily consider particular types of magazine, usually grouping them by gender. Joke Hermes' study considers women's magazines through the lens of readers' use (1995). Dawn Currie focuses on girls' magazines and their adolescent readers (1999). Peter Jackson, Nick Stevenson and Kate Brooks examine the new grouping of men's (or lads') magazines and their readers (2001). Shorter academic analyses of magazines have a more particularist bent, concentrating on investigations of specific magazines, usually focusing on topics like health or sexuality. The very size of the field, its enormous range and the constantly changing number of titles make other approaches extremely difficult.

This article attempts to consider generic characteristics of magazine content by focusing on a common type of feature story and arguing for the broader applicability of the findings. Mass market consumer magazines divide their editorial content into features and service sections. The latter section is where straightforward articles providing direct information and advice targeted to the assumed readership occur. For mass market women's magazines, this is in the form of recipes, patterns, decorator and gardening hints as well as health or nutrition advice; for fashion magazines, advice on clothes and beauty products; for men's magazines, details on consumer electronics and motor vehicles. Some magazines, like the various national editions of *Family Circle* or the majority of specialist magazines from computing to gardening, may be all-service, though a lead article may include some 'softening',

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usually personalising, elements. In contrast to the information-heavy service sections, features are concerned with entertainment.

For mass market magazines — and indeed for many more specialist ones too — it is customary for feature stories to lead non-advertising content and for cover lines announcing them to dominate the front cover. This indicates that it is features which are most important in the promotion of the magazines to the ‘swinging’ purchasers whose movement between competing titles is the principal cause of circulation variation from issue to issue. Editors believe that service sections appeal most to loyal readers, but that feature stories, especially those about celebrities, attract the uncommitted (details from interview with Bunty Avieson in Turner, Bonner and Marshall, 2000: 119). Feature stories, then, are the more significant component of magazine content in production terms since circulation (by comparison with competitors seeking the same market) determines advertising costs. Jenny McKay lists the types of feature story to be found across a range of British magazines: news backgrounders; interviews and profiles; composite interviews which tell a human interest story by linking interviews on a common topic; reportage (the time-consuming investigative reporting rarely to be found but occasionally evident in up-market titles); and human interest, the largest category, where stories are told through the eyes of those involved and which thus can include much of the interview and profile category, personal columns of the cancer diary kind, and ‘triumph over tragedy’ stories of horror, death or merely embarrassment (2000: 80–89).

The relative importance of timeliness to service sections and to features is worth considering. Time is much less important to service sections, though obviously seasonal imperatives have an impact, since gardens, recipes, clothing and health advice all vary from one season to another. Release dates of consumer items like new cars, mobile phones or lipstick ranges are obviously important, but companies plan these to give magazines plenty of time to prepare their copy. Features, on the other hand, are much less predictable. Some, like much of the celebrity coverage, are linked to the promotion of new products and thus can be planned for to some extent, but since feature material is overwhelmingly concerned with the activities of human beings, the unpredictable is always a factor for features editors. Celebrity couples announce their break-ups with little warning, natural disasters devastate populations and ordinary people suddenly find themselves the centre of attention because they are the beneficiaries of medical ‘miracles’ or financial good fortune. Timeliness does not have the imperative character for magazines that it has for daily papers or hourly radio news bulletins, but it is still important. Like news outlets, consumer magazines also need to cope with the interface of the unpredictability of real-world events and the imperatives of weekly or monthly publication. Industries — media or otherwise — attempt to routinise decision-making by reducing the extent to which individual decisions have to be taken on each occurrence by developing practices which, overtly or not, produce guidelines to be followed.

This paper explores factors in the routinisation of magazines’ handling of feature stories by looking for consistencies across a large number of articles published over

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a 20-year period in order to articulate the principles which are apparently being applied in the selection of items deemed to be worth publishing. To help standardise our investigation, and to make it more manageable, we drew our data from a subset of feature articles concerned with health. This grouping combined entertaining human interest and usable information in a hybrid we chose to call infotainment. Specialist magazines were not our concern in this study; instead, we focused on high-circulation Australian mass market titles, drawing on three Australian examples: *Woman's Day*, *New Idea* and *The Australian Women's Weekly*.

## Terms

The portmanteau term 'infotainment' is most frequently used to apply to television, where it was developed to describe changes consequent on the collapse of the rubric that it was the role of television to educate, inform and entertain. Since the late 1980s, while entertainment and information (referring mainly to news and sometimes its related forms of current affairs and documentary) remain, education has become the concern of special programming and in its place has developed the hybridised grouping 'infotainment' — non-fictional programs which combine information and entertainment. As the number of channels proliferated with the introduction of cable and other pay services, information programs had to become more entertaining to attract sufficient viewers to remain viable. Unfortunately, there are different inflections of the term across the world: in the United States and continental Europe, it refers predominantly to new, less serious, more personalised forms of current affairs, while in Australia and the United Kingdom it refers to lifestyle programming. We will be following the Australian/UK practice here. Infotainment television in Australia and the United Kingdom is characteristically lively, lightweight programming. It involves ordinary people interacting with a celebrity host; it tends towards a television magazine format of short, colourful items; and it adopts an approach which can verge on the hyperactive in seeking to divert and entertain viewers who are conceived as wanting a little bit of helpful advice about a predominantly domestic issue. While most infotainment television is concerned with the house and garden, other issues are also addressed, like household finances, holidays and health. Even with the potential in this last category for sombre items, it is rare for coverage to be other than upbeat. Obviously this description does not carry across directly to magazines, yet they have been concerned with presenting information in an entertaining and upbeat manner for far longer than television.

An alternative possible term is 'tabloid', and work on tabloids and the process of tabloidisation will be drawn on here to help analyse the data because, ever since the term was disarticulated from its primary identification with the shape of a newspaper, it has been used to name changes in the presentation of information aimed to make items — whether in print or electronic media — more attractive to readers. Applied to television, the term tends to be used to condemn. David Scholle discussing American programs like *Hard Copy*, talks of their focus on 'moral disorder and deviance — sex power, deviant families, corruption, greed and victimization' and their 'personalis[ing of] these actions through subjective treatment'

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(1993: 56). Bob Franklin was another who deplored the changes, using the term 'newzak' to refer to both newspaper and television journalism in the 1990s, claiming:

human interest has supplanted the public interest; measured judgement has succumbed to sensationalism; the trivial has triumphed over the weighty; the intimate relationships of celebrities ... are judged more 'newsworthy' than the reporting of significant issues and events of international importance. Traditional news values have been undermined by new values; 'infotainment' is rampant. (1997: 4)

Graeme Turner has noted that critics of tabloidisation on television condemn its tendency 'to sacrifice information for entertainment, accuracy for sensation, and to employ tactics of representation which entrap and exploit its subjects' (1999: 60), but argues that the term is too 'baggy' to be useful and abandons it to concentrate on the last of the cited charges. Taking a different approach, Elizabeth Bird, in a detailed study of American supermarket tabloid papers, identifies a number of factors as characteristic: emphases on celebrities, offbeat human interest, stories of rags to riches transformation, of volunteers and heroes, of the handicapped overcoming odds, of medical miracles and discoveries, of strange phenomena, of bureaucratic waste and incompetence; of current news with a twist and 'gee whiz' items (1992: 39-64). Increasing the relevance of these to magazine studies, she talks of the transformation of these papers in the late 1960s from their previous emphasis on gore, by noting how the *National Enquirer* in particular took as its model magazines like *Readers' Digest* and the *American Woman's Day* (1992: 27). Both Catharine Lumby and John Hartley have discussed tabloidisation of news media, with its greater proportion of human interest, sex and celebrity, as involving the feminisation of media practices — and done so approvingly (Lumby, 1997: 117-35; Hartley, 1996: 171-95).

'Sensationalism' is a key term here and it is important to recall that it is a quality and a style of presentation already evident in nineteenth century newspapers, associated particularly with Joseph Pulitzer's transformation of *New York World* where, to the prior characteristics of an interest in 'sex, violence, crime, tragedy, farce', he added lots of pictures and arresting headlines as well as simplifying the vocabulary and sentence structure (Juergens, 1966: 47). It now refers most particularly to stylistic attempts to elicit emotional reactions from readers, but the lines of descent from Pulitzer's brash headlines are clear.

Tabloidisation is not such a serious charge when laid against magazines as it is when used to discuss changes in news or television current affairs treatment, since magazines (with the exception of news magazines, conventionally excluded along with trade titles from the category 'consumer magazines') have always been a devalued form compared with newspapers, radio and television. Furthermore, they combined the informational with entertainment long before such a trend was regarded as televisually innovative. 'Tabloid' could be applied to both the purely entertaining and the 'infotaining' features of many magazines, but 'infotainment' has been chosen here since it has more neutrality and, in its stress on the provision of usable information, is far more applicable to our concerns. Part of the legacy of the old

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dominance of magazines by service sections lies in the conception of the relationship between reader and text as one based on the seeking and giving of advice. Infotainment can continue this practice outside the service section and in doing so help make the magazine a more harmonious whole. Magazine health items, whether in service sections giving advice on dealing with the common cold or in feature articles discussing a celebrity's responses to discovering she has breast cancer, are what John Mephram has called 'usable stories' — one of his criteria for 'quality' television (1991: 25) and something to set against the denigratory connotations of the term 'tabloid'.

In transferring the idea of usable stories to magazines and in stressing the utility of magazine advice, it is important to be mindful of Joke Hermes' argument that the readers she talked to were minimally concerned with the meaningfulness of the items they had read in the magazines she examined (1995: 143). Hermes refers primarily to entertainment stories and her comment appears mainly to be about the veracity of gossip items. In addition, she does note that the readers admitted to magazines having a 'practical value' when they provided recipes and tips — referring, in other words, to their service sections (1995: 143). McKay addresses Hermes' charge of the insignificance of magazine content directly, by arguing that this is in contrast to the discoveries of research commissioned by publishers which shows that readers build up trust in their magazines (2000: 218). The distinction between entertainment and infotainment is a helpful one for adjudicating the matter here. Trust and meaningfulness (and indeed veracity) are relevant to items giving advice directly or indirectly, but by no means so important when the item is intended only to entertain.

If the characteristics which mark tabloidisation are too frivolous to apply directly to infotainment stories, then the criteria of newsworthiness are too serious; yet, in looking for factors which help routinise the unpredictable in magazine decision-making, that is the other pole of our inquiry. In some respects we are following the lead of one of the most influential pieces of writing in the field of communication, cultural and media studies — Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge's 'The Structure of Foreign News', published in the first issue of the *Journal of Peace Research*. Very few pieces of writing continue to have an impact in the field of media studies decades after their first appearance, yet this one does. Republished in whole or in part many times since its first appearance in 1965, it has also provided the foundation for many later studies of the determinants of newsworthiness. Galtung and Ruge investigated the characteristics of foreign news stories which made them more likely to actually become news. They focused strictly on foreign news and drew their data from four Norwegian newspapers, but subsequent work has found the characteristics apply just as well in very different contexts and to domestic concerns.

Galtung and Ruge posit general factors which make events in the real world more likely to be reported as newsworthy. We will detail these at some length because some, though by no means all, are relevant in the chain of argument by which we develop our own criteria. The first they term 'frequency', arguing that the more similar the time in which an event unfolded is to the frequency of

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publication of a reporting medium (which is also termed its periodicity — daily for newspapers, hourly for radio bulletins), the more likely an event is to become news (1965: 66). Other factors are: threshold; lack of ambiguity; meaningfulness in terms both of cultural proximity or ethnocentrism and relevance; consonance; unexpectedness (but only comparatively, for an item must fulfil the prior requirement of being meaningful); and continuity, for once an item has been defined as newsworthy, it and similar items continue to be seen as such for a period of time. Finally, they assert the influence of composition, which leads to the desirability of a degree of variety within a single issue or bulletin (1965: 66–67). In addition to these factors, which they believe to be relatively independent of the culture producing the news, they assert that, in the 'north-western part of the world' (but which would probably be more accurate to conceive of now as the developed world), four other factors also operate. These are emphases on elite nations, elite people, personalisation and negativity (1965: 68–69). The factors are often interrelated and Galtung and Ruge argue that the likelihood of an item becoming news is heightened if it satisfies several of the factors, and that those factors which are satisfied will be emphasised in such a way that the story will be distorted (1965: 71).

These findings have continued to provide the basis for work on newsworthiness (see Fowler, 1991: 13–14; since 1985, the article has been cited in over 100 further articles, according to the *SSCI*). Although some later works have modified their findings a little, the core of their hypotheses and the language used to express them are still evident throughout discussion of news media. Although now describing domestic as well as foreign news, Galtung and Ruge's study remains a study of *news*, being of little applicability to newspaper features and not drawn on at all to talk of consumer magazines, although it has obvious pertinence for news magazines (indeed, this is overt in the study's discussion of periodicity).

### The study

The health-based features in Australian mass market women's magazines which provide the data from which we build our argument all concern personal experiences with illness. This is how information is rendered entertaining and worthy of feature as well as service section treatment. Health is a significant area of concern for the magazines. In previous research into how various health issues have been represented in the popular media over a 50-year period, we have observed both how health generally has become more important as a topic for the magazines in this period and how narratives about the experience of illness have increasingly become a staple inclusion in magazine health coverage, along with advice columns, health promotion items and medical articles. Since 1950, there has been 30-fold increase in the number of health-related items published in *The Australian Women's Weekly* (Bonner, McKay and Goldie, 1998: 155). During this time, the number of personal narratives published has also proliferated significantly.

In the 1960s, there were a few health feature stories which were not illness narratives but concerned themselves solely with the people who had developed a cure for a particular disease, like Salk and Sabin with their polio vaccines. This is

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no longer the case and, even when new treatments are discussed, the primary focus is almost always on a person who has experienced the particular condition and whose life has been improved by the new regimen. An investigation of the generic characteristics of the more recent illness narratives will try to explain how the publishing imperatives for magazines led to these particular types of stories being published over others. We believe that, in the same way that Galtung and Ruge's criteria have been used successfully to discuss more than foreign news, so our study of health-related stories can be used more widely to discuss a range of magazine stories. Many other types of magazine feature stories — for example, narratives of an individual's professional success or of how they have chosen to give their home a makeover — provide this mix of information and entertainment. Since what we are concerned with is not the category of news and thus the quality of newsworthiness, we need another term to describe the factors we identify. We have chosen the term 'infotainment criteria'.

To begin our consideration, it is important to note that the slower rate of publication in conjunction with the types of stories that are perceived to be infotaining alters the way that stories can be seen as operating. The first of Galtung and Ruge's criteria, frequency, is helpful here. Magazines certainly have a reduced sense of urgency compared with newspapers, and this comes from their different periodicity, but a weekly periodicity accords well with stories of crises in celebrities' private lives. Health, however, has a different periodicity from this and from the political crises and disasters which are the mainstay of newspapers; the progress of a medical condition and its treatment and cure can easily cover a period of years. Whether weekly or monthly, magazine publication frequency is out of step with health issues or indeed with most phenomena on which advice is given. Frequency, then, is not a significant infotainment value. At times (as was the case with the death of Princess Diana), urgency can be discerned in magazines, but they are almost always scooped by other media. Some other factors have to compensate.

As previously noted, Galtung and Ruge observe that the last four of their criteria are culturally bound. Unlike some of the preceding ones, all of these have some applicability to magazine illness narratives. In their terms, these criteria relate to elite persons, elite nations, and to stories that are both personal and negative. In more contemporary phrasing, appropriate to magazine coverage, this means that we would expect stories of bad things happening to prominent celebrities from highly developed countries to be top of the list for contemporary *news* stories — and indeed this is the case. Princess Margaret's strokes and subsequent death; Nicole Kidman's miscarriage; even Robert Downey Junior's ongoing problems have all been the subject of newspapers and television bulletins. They also have all been covered in the mass market women's magazines, but the stories there have been either small gossip paragraphs or feature items aimed at entertaining readers. The distinction between entertainment and infotainment here is clear. Kidman's miscarriage was covered in ways that exemplify tabloid journalism — the stress on Tom Cruise's alleged call for a DNA test being just one component of the sensationalising of the coverage. There were no stories which combined Kidman's experience with advice to readers about steps they should take in the

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event of a miscarriage or to prevent one happening, as would have been the approach in an infotainment piece.

Although this story is characterised by all four of Galtung and Ruge's culturally bound factors, it can be used to demonstrate how arguably the single most powerful of their factors — negativity — operates differently for infotainment. As a feature story aimed simply at entertaining readers, it was possible for the article to be published with the negativity (miscarriage, suspicion, 'heartbreak') undiminished. Indeed, the negative aspects effectively constituted the story. For infotainment stories, aimed at providing usable information, negativity is rarely undiluted. The drive for an upbeat ending for the entertainment part of the story to carry the advice component is so high that even as powerful a factor as negativity cannot simply be transferred from news to infotainment. An example from our study entitled 'Tabetha's Talents Outshine the Dark Clouds of Tragedy' (Waby, 1985) demonstrates this clearly. It is about a young music student who perseveres for several years with an undiagnosed form of leukaemia but is finally cured after two bone marrow transplants and eventually wins a prestigious composition prize. It was not the negativity that rendered this story worthy of publication, but the cure and subsequent professional success. The information about the diagnosis of the disease and its cure, together with the entertainment of the narrative of triumph over adversity, focus far more on the happy conclusion than the negative beginning.

The illness narratives we examined were almost invariably — like this — reflective ones, most commonly telling of the course of an illness and its treatment from initial symptoms to recovery. Negativity predicates the story in that symptoms appear, a diagnosis is sought and the news is bad, but this hardly ever ends the story. Negativity cannot operate alone. In the terms used most frequently in the articles (and which are the key to the genre), tragedy strikes but is overcome. The principal variations occurred when the stories were of disabilities or the medical condition was chronic. In these instances, the concluding move was one of adjustment and acceptance. It appears that, if the tragedy cannot be overcome, negativity must be muted by the discovery of some form of consolation.

After an extensive examination of the health stories from 20 years of the three magazines, we established the existence of nine criteria that recurred throughout the texts and which we will argue constitute the underlying infotainment values apparent in health narratives published in mass market women's magazines. These criteria are: personalisation, celebrity, proximity, magnitude, sequels, topicality, excess, tragedy and redemptive meaning.

### **Personalisation**

While Galtung and Ruge's negativity needs significant recasting, the stress on individuals and personal concerns is such that we have chosen to retain the term 'personalisation'. In broad terms, this refers to all stories involving people, whether celebrities or ordinary people. However, since treatment is quite different for the two groups, we have placed celebrity as a separate criterion. Mass market magazine feature articles have to involve people, otherwise — as when they discuss new domestic commodities — they become service items. Personalisation, then, is the most basic criterion — the one that must be fulfilled.



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A past editor of *New Idea*, Bunty Avieson, has observed that stories about people's experiences with illness, especially for severe and chronic diseases and conditions, are far more palatable than yet another piece of impersonal public health information (Turner, Bonner and Marshall, 2000: 136). The applicability of this beyond her own title is certainly supported by the increase in illness narratives mentioned above and, while she demonstrated what she meant by reference to a celebrity — actor Belinda Emmett — it also applies to ordinary people.

However, not just any story about a person can get published; it needs to fulfil some other criterion. When that criterion is celebrity, matters can be quite simple and straightforward; however, when the person concerned is ordinary, the story must be quite heavily marked by whatever that criterion is — tragedy or excess, for example. This is evident in 'While You Were Sleeping', which tells the story of a woman named Zia Gligora who had a massive brain haemorrhage when six months pregnant. While she was in a coma, doctors operated on the haemorrhage and performed an emergency Caesarian. When she woke up, she had no memory of ever being pregnant and was disbelieving when presented with a son. In a further note of excess, the son himself had had a minor haemorrhage (Dale, 1998). The informational content of this article was slight, given how rare such a situation would be, and it would be reasonable to consider this very much a tabloid story with its sensational gee whiz content, yet the structure stressed its similarity to more informational items and a final paragraph included information on an appeal by the Neurosurgical Research Foundation. Articles like this about ordinary people, where personalisation was combined with excess, were customarily less informative than those which combined personalisation with topicality, as will be seen below.

The magazine emphasis on personalisation had another effect. By linking individual people strongly to particular medical conditions, the person could become iconic, as Eve van Grafhorst did, becoming the face of children with HIV-AIDS in Australasia. Fiona Coote was used similarly for heart transplant recipients. This resulted in something of a transformation of the ordinary person into a celebrity.

### **Celebrity**

There is no doubt that celebrities maintain their pre-eminence in mass market women's magazine entertainment features, but they are also prominent in informational ones. In contrast to stories about ordinary people, items about celebrities could be about quite mundane medical conditions, like breast lumps (which proved on examination to be benign) or fairly minor accidents, or back pain. The qualifying criterion was the celebrity — and even that could be quite minor. This was the case with 'Naomi's Worst Nightmare', in which television reporter Naomi Robson talks about her mother's allergic reaction to a European wasp sting (Boling, 1994). In this case, the story gave quite a deal of information about the allergic condition, but it was also notable that what the celebrity suffered was concern. Still, her celebrity was sufficient, even at one remove, to render this item about her mother publishable.

The comment above about individuals becoming iconic with respect to particular medical conditions applies also to celebrities. Olivia Newton-John became an icon for Australian women with breast cancer, and for many years after the articles

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which revealed her fight with the disease were published, no article about her — no matter what its principal topic might be — could be published without referring to her recovery.

### **Proximity**

Proximity is another of Galtung and Ruge's criteria which continues to operate. Both here and for Galtung and Ruge, proximity refers to cultural rather than geographic closeness, and overlaps with our earlier comment about developed countries. The idea of proximity in news stories is that it renders the item more meaningful, more able to be understood. In recent decades, stories about ordinary people have required absolute proximity — with very few exceptions, they must refer to Australians. Fifty years ago, stories about ordinary people in Britain were occasionally to be found. The only exceptions that we have encountered recently to the requirement that stories about ordinary people be set in Australia involve either a very close link in the story itself with Australia or an aspect so overwhelmingly extraordinary as to be barely informational.

For stories involving celebrities, proximity applies in conjunction with Galtung and Ruge's category of 'elite nations'. American and European celebrities are readily proximate to Australia and they and their illnesses receive regular coverage. African, Asian and South American countries are much less proximate and stories about celebrities from these places hardly ever appear.

### **Magnitude**

The perception of the likely magnitude of the story was another factor impacting on its inclusion in the magazine. Magnitude was exhibited in unambiguous ways — a reference to the story on the magazine cover, a large number of pages devoted to it, or several separate stories on a single medical condition. This last case was the principal way in which ordinary people appeared in stories of significant magnitude. The stories exhibiting the greatest magnitude almost always concerned celebrities. Olivia Newton-John's initial revelation of her experiences with breast cancer filled six pages and provided the cover photograph and main cover line (Olivar, 1993). The relationships between celebrities and magazines are symbiotic, with magazines aware that celebrities attract readers and celebrities aware of the need for repeated coverage to maintain their status and promote their products (Turner, Bonner and Marshall, 2000: Ch. 5; Sholle, 1993: 70). Revelations about experiences with medical conditions and subsequent recovery are all part of this trade of privacy for fame, and the 'juicier' the story the more substantial the coverage and the better the concomitant promotion. This becomes evident in a cover line like '*Suddenly Susan* Star Warns: My Liposuction Nearly Killed Me'. It is notable here that it is the television program that is regarded as instantly recognisable and thus attractive to readers, rather than Kathy Griffin, the actor involved ('Lipo Sucks!', 2000).

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## Sequels

Linked to the notion of magnitude, and to Galtung and Ruge's factor of continuity, is the criterion of the sequel — or at least the possibility for sequels. The slower rate of magazine publication reduces the extent to which individual stories can run on through several issues, so it is better to conceive of this as involving specific returns, rather than more continuous coverage. An open-ended story which can be revisited may be hard to identify when it first becomes available, especially if the previously noted preference for a happy ending is observed. This criterion operates far more obviously with the follow-up itself. A story which gives more details about the consequences of something already successfully covered is more likely to be published than one of the same magnitude which is completely new. Both celebrities and a few rather special ordinary people featured in updates to report on what had happened since the last story. Ordinary people who became subject to several follow-up stories themselves acquired minor celebrity and usually some measure of iconic status. This was the case for Quentin Kenihan, who became a spokesperson for brittle-bone disease. He had been a media presence since a baby and 'Life with Quentin' updated the reader on his condition and political interventions (Kenihan, 1987).

Olivia Newton-John's breast cancer, already mentioned, is an obvious celebrity example here, receiving repeated follow-ups for several years. 'Olivia's Story' started by referring back to the illness and its treatment but gave equal space to promoting her new album (Lesmond, 1994). Even in 2001, an article about her daughter Chloë's singing career discussed the impact of her mother's breast cancer on her when she was a child. It then talked about Olivia being fit and the cancer being formally in remission, but how Olivia 'prefer[s] to think that the cancer is gone forever' (Sheather, 2001: 44).

More than this, people with enduring celebrity were regularly the subject of stories reporting on milestones or new health issues. The personal trials and tribulations of stars like Liz Taylor have appeared in the magazines for over 50 years. In part, this is a further example of the activities of publicists whose job it is to keep the celebrity in the public eye. On the other hand, ordinary people could also feature in this way, as was the case with multiple births like the Sara quads (now in their forties).

## Topicality

The criterion of topicality describes aspects of the dimension of timeliness in the slower proceedings of magazine publication. It refers, for instance, to the propensity of a story to publicise a contemporary health issue — like children with polio during the 1950s, or Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) more recently. It can also be seen in stories designed to raise awareness and/or educate the readership about a public health initiative — for example, in the *New Idea* breast cancer campaign. The information aspect of the articles results directly in their being usable stories by, for instance, advising readers to have a mammogram, or perhaps suggesting they get their sugar levels checked, or have a mole investigated, while the personal narratives attached personalise the advice. In this way, infotainment enables the

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magazines to seem up to date by giving information about current public concerns and also by being proactive in demonstrating how to deal with a health problem through a personal account.

Timely stories are also produced by articles on the discovery of new diseases and/or treatments. 'Hospital Horror: I Was Attacked by the Flesh-eating Bug' provided a highly tabloid account of a woman's encounter with necrotising fasciitis. A sidebar to the story provides a non-personalised account of the condition and its history (Gibbs, 2002). 'A Gift of Life' discusses the use of (umbilical) cord blood through a story about a pregnant woman hoping her new child's blood cells will be able to be used to treat her seven-year-old daughter's leukemia (Ward, 1995).

A very different way in which topicality is made evident is when celebrity-based stories combine health information with the promotion of a current performance or the release of a new cultural product.

### **Excess**

The principal way in which non-celebrity stories are rendered entertaining is through excess, either stylistically or in the events reported. This criterion is a risky one, however, for while it can increase the likelihood of a story being published, in almost every instance it reduces the extent to which it can produce usable stories. Too strong a dependence on excess stops a story being an infotainment one and may render it completely tabloid. The story already examined about the woman who gave birth in a coma comes close to doing this. A common form of excess is the presence of more than one medical condition; alternatively, there can be an escalating sequence of medical disasters. This can be seen in 'Patricia's Motivation Could Move Mountains', in which an Australian tourist in New York first develops a bad cold, then her eardrums get perforated in a lift, she goes into a coma, develops spinal meningitis, followed by partial paralysis, bleeding ulcers and severe arthritis and spends several years in a wheelchair before making a limited physical recovery, but a full social one (Hickson, 1985). The headline points not just to the way the story is to be read as involving a positive outcome, but also to its function as a usable story about perseverance.

Another favoured type of story which could be seen to exhibit excess involved families where more than one member was dealing with a chronic condition. 'The Signs of Love' told of deaf parents who had five children, including a set of triplets, all born by IVF, four of whom had some kind of hearing impairment (Pritchard, 1994). Like the previous example, this too was written in such a way as to inspire readers.

Stylistic practices designed to elicit excessive responses can also be detected in otherwise simple stories made more entertaining by the choice of headlines, like 'ER Saved My Child', where watching the television medical drama allegedly gave a young girl the necessary training in CPR to save her baby sister when she nearly drowned (Machlouch, 1999); or two infotainment features on breast replacement surgery: 'My Buttocks Became My Breasts' (Lateo, 1995) and 'My Tummy Became My Breast' (Barnes, 1996).

In some stories, the desire to astound seemed far more significant than the desire to inform. In the closest to a fully tabloid presentation of any article in our

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sample, a story about an American couple both suffering from breast cancer was far more a 'gee whiz' story than a personal experience of illness (MacKenzie, 1995). We coded this as an infotainment story solely on its provision of the odds for men developing breast cancer; otherwise it was like the article on Nicole's miscarriage — which, while health-related, was presented as a gossip story.

### **Tragedy**

We mentioned earlier that negativity had to be recast, and we have chosen to indicate this by naming this factor — as the magazines often do themselves — 'tragedy'. The differences between ordinary people and celebrities become particularly evident here. With ordinary people, misfortune must be substantial to become worthy of magazine coverage, and 'tragedy' seems often to be a reasonable term. Illness frequently strikes without warning for people not in known risk categories or those who have been taking proper precautions, and there is thus an element of its being unjust. Suffering then mounts and frequently excess is exhibited as tragedy piles on tragedy and it may even be announced that hope was lost, though it is exceedingly rare for this to be the end of the story. A good example of this is provided by the case of Jerri Nielsen, the doctor on an American Antarctic base who, despite having had a mammogram only six months previously, developed breast cancer while the base was iced in. She diagnosed and treated herself until a plane could land to evacuate her. In hospital after a lumpectomy, she developed a staphylococcus infection. Meanwhile, her children — encouraged by her ex-husband — refused to have any contact with her (Nielsen, 2001).

The announcement that celebrities are subjects of tragedy can be quite hyperbolic, as is the case for their alleged romantic misfortunes. Whether or not the medical condition is a serious one, magazine infotainment features need to keep the emotional tenor cranked up and so bad health news relating to celebrities is persistently a tragedy — witness the previously mentioned story about Naomi Robson's 'nightmare'.

### **Redemptive meaning**

As we noted earlier, negative stories were not allowed to stand alone without some consoling message — a characteristic we are terming 'redemptive meaning' — being attributed to the experience. This meaning was not only for the person involved and their relatives, but was also projected into the wider community. Frequently, sufferers spoke of establishing self-help groups and even more often indicated that, by telling their story, they hoped to help others. This altruism could be found in stories about both ordinary people and celebrities (McKay and Bonner, 2002: 61–62). For example, agoraphobic Nicole Hemsley ends her story by asserting her desire to lecture children about anxiety to teach them not to be ashamed (1995).

The extent to which the story can display the ability to cope and then carry on regardless is presented as an inspiration to others. The inspiration and uplifting effect are part of why readers are regarded as being interested in the story. At times, the narratives tell of challenges met and overcome. Strength and courage — especially if the medical prognosis was very negative — make a good story.

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A quotation from Patricia, whose escalating troubles were mentioned above, exemplifies this: 'More than anything I learned the value of love — particularly the love of my sons and my husband ... and I have also learned to make every minute of my life count.' (Hickson, 1985: 33) Furthermore, she announced that she was writing a book about her experiences to encourage other disabled people to help themselves.

## Discussion

Our analysis has been retrospective inasmuch as we have looked at the stories published to identify common features that influenced their getting chosen by the editorial staff. It could not look at stories discarded because they met insufficient criteria, although we acknowledge that studies which can draw on this kind of data or on ethnographies of journalists' production practices provide very rich data (e.g. Reisner, 1992; Liebes, 2000).

Galtung and Ruge claim that the more of their criteria an individual story exhibits, the more likely it is to be chosen. We think this is the case with our sample too. Certainly we found very few stories which exhibited only one or even two criteria. The key criteria for health articles are tragedy and redemptive meaning. The other criteria help establish which articles with these qualities will succeed and all describe ways in which the narratives are rendered strong enough to be deemed of interest to a readership wanting an involving, entertaining story — and not averse to receiving some health information with it.

Ending a set of criteria with excess, tragedy and redemptive meaning is a clear indication that the phenomenon under discussion is operating in the melodramatic mode and we need both to acknowledge this and to consider what its consequences are before attempting to extend our study. Regardless of its initial ambit of operation, melodrama now conventionally names a feminine mode of representation (see Brooks, 1976; Gledhill, 1987; Neale, 2000). Its requisite characteristics are excess, an ethical concern with good and evil and the eliciting of strong emotions. This enables us to consider a little further the operation of sensationalism that we noted earlier was a feature of tabloidisation. It is because of their centrally melodramatic qualities — the triumph over tragedy, the people rendered more virtuous by their suffering and the sheer frequency of excess — that health stories lend themselves to sensationalism at the same time as they are able to operate instructively. But it is also this melodramatic predisposition that makes generalising from the evidence rather problematic.

## Extending the application

In considering the extent to which the criteria developed from the set of illness narratives in mass media women's magazines can be used for other infotainment features in both similar and different magazines, we are unable to draw on as substantial a body of data. We shall therefore only sketch out wider applicability drawing on a very limited sample.

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First, we can extend the analysis to infotainment features in the same magazines which do not deal with health. An example of a very different kind of feature was a political one from *The Australian Women's Weekly* entitled 'Bitter Harvest' (Langley, 2002). The most common type of political story in these magazines is a profile of a politician, but this one looked at the dispossession of white farmers in Zimbabwe. Information about the political situation was rendered entertaining through telling the stories of four families involved, most of whom had Australian connections. The instance thus exhibited the characteristics of personalisation, proximity, topicality, magnitude (it was six pages long) and tragedy (for the individuals discussed and the socio-political situation in the country). The same applies to a story from an Australian journalist who witnessed the events of September 11 in New York (Tulloch, 2001). The homecoming from Laotian detention of Australian couple Kay and Kerry Danes also received extensive coverage (Davies, 2001).

Another group of mass market magazines comprises those more emphatically concerned with entertainment gossip. *Who Weekly* (the Australian version of the US *People*) principally focuses on celebrities and is not substantially interested in infotainment, since its service sections provide television guides and reviews of films, music and books. It does, however, have a continuing interest in inspirational stories. 'True Grit' tells of an ordinary Australian who is a multiple amputee, focusing on his family and his determination to master his prosthetic legs (Webster and Ambrose, 2002). Of our criteria, it exhibits personalisation, proximity, excess, tragedy and redemptive meaning. It is undoubtedly a triumph over tragedy and emphatically melodramatic in structure (from the suddenness of the onset of the illness to the concluding comments on his happiness at being alive and his wedding plans) and tone (he 'collapsed, screaming in agony' (2002: 49); his initial musing: 'What girl is going to want me to touch her with metal arms?' (2002: 51)). Admittedly, this is still a health story, but many — if not most — of the inspirational stories are. Anniversary issues of the magazine customarily check back on past stories of this kind and (as well as demonstrating the operation of the 'sequel' criterion); these demonstrate the prevalence of health concerns (e.g. 'Cover Girl' in the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue returned to update an earlier story about a child born as a result of a new IVF technique — *Who Weekly*, 2002).

A look at the Australian edition of *Cosmopolitan* for October 2002 revealed that infotainment was the dominant style for features. Articles on depression, eating disorders, bullying, homelessness, 'practice marriages', career advice and the criteria for choosing boyfriends were all presented through personalised stories. In some instances, the stories obviously comprised case studies and, in several, pseudonyms were used, but repeatedly the way material shifted from service sections to features was through infotainment. In addition to personalisation, the most common criteria for these stories were proximity, magnitude and topicality. Excess, tragedy and redemptive meaning were all to be found, though not in as many articles.

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## Conclusion

The practice of some magazines — especially mass market consumer ones targeting female readerships, but also some specialist titles — of including a number of infotainment feature articles to provide usable information in an entertaining way is an under-investigated characteristic of contemporary media. The criteria identified here, while drawn from health stories in Australian women's magazines, are amenable to wider use in analyses of the content of magazines aimed largely at women. Their origin in health-based features means that the criteria of tragedy and redemptive meaning are more significant than might otherwise be the case — and certainly the inapplicability of these criteria and that of excess to the specialist titles discussed supports this. These three criteria are indications that the infotainment features are operating in a melodramatic mode where the didactic thrust of the stories, especially about perseverance, the importance of hope and the duty to care for both the self and others, is carried by an emotional appeal. This is primarily located in inspirational examples of people who are — celebrities or not — depicted as very like the envisaged readers.

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