



Magazine editors, objectivity and neutrality.

“We cannot at any stage be seen to be political, as we are not here to engender change, but to inspire”

By Nadia Sanger

Abstract

This paper explores notions of objectivity, neutrality and the “political” in the views of South African magazine editors and how these views relate to their representations of gender and sexuality. It argues, from a feminist poststructuralist position, that the insistence on the objectivity and neutrality of their publications is in sharp contrast to the ways in which a political position is taken in presenting gender and sexuality in binaristic and unequal terms within the pages of the magazines. The presentation of women and homosexuals in these magazines as “other” and exotic erases any claim of objectivity and neutrality.

Key words

Magazines, editors, objectivity, gender

Editors’ roles

The article is based on interviews with five editors of South African magazines – *For Him Magazine* (FHM), *Men’s Health*, *Blink*, *True Love* and *Fair Lady*. The editors of *FHM* and *Men’s Health* are white males, the editor of *Fair Lady* is a white female, *True Love* has a black female editor, and *Blink* had a black male editor before the magazine ceased to exist, as discussed later in this article. Except for *Blink* magazine, which no longer exists, interviewees will be anonymous and not linked to the magazine brand which she/he represents, though the article will disclose the “race” and sex of the interviewee.

Most editors linked the success of their magazines-making as the priority,” noting that “a

successful magazine taps into the heads of its reader-ship – their needs, desires and lifestyles’ (white male editor of a men’s magazine). Another white male editor of a men’s magazine noted that magazines are much more concerned with the bottom line than with playing an important role as change agents. Magazines are very commercially orientated and people who work there see their jobs as growing circulation/readers. The business prerogative in magazine publishing is far more dominant than the social one.

Similarly, the editor of a woman’s magazine relates that “consumers only respond to something that has personal appeal for them, which means that

they are already predisposed to the subject matter.” Both these editors appear to agree that magazines merely *reflect* the realities of its readership – they do not produce realities.

This is different to the views of ex-editor of *Blink* magazine, Siphwe Mpye, on his role in building *Blink* magazine. Mpye (2006) notes for example that *Blink* set out to

To show the rest of the country that the affluent black male has not only emerged, but will, given time, increasingly be the backbone of [the South African] economy... we had also realised and wanted to show this man to be about much more than soccer, BMWs and bling. We wanted to show that he was also passionate, compassionate, intelligent, worldly, sensitive, politically aware, discerning (Mpye in Viljoen 2007, in press).

Discussions around notions of what constitutes the “political”, objectivity and neutrality constantly highlighted differences in what these editors saw as their role.

Magazines as creators of meaning

As agents of socialisation, the media could play an important role in social responsibility by raising awareness about such issues as HIV/AIDS, male violence against women and children, racism and poverty, amongst other social problems in South Africa. Others who see the media as having a critical responsibility in transforming South African society have argued this. Boswell (2002) for instance has argued that the media has both the power and responsibility in shaping society's views about the world. She points out that the media could be either a tool for maintaining the status quo or a tool for transformation. Similarly, Tomaselli and Tomaselli (2001), talk about the role of the media – including magazines – as both sites and instruments of transformation. As instruments of transformation, the authors relate how the media provides important platforms for information, debate and education “around issues shaping the kind of society we are, and the kind of society we wish to become” (2001, 124).



Most media miss out showing the caring, sensitive side of men

Credit: Trevor Davies

In terms of gender and sexuality, many feminist theorists have commented on the ways in which media presents women. Boswell (2002) for instance has argued that the media plays a critical role in shaping constructions of femininities by reinforcing “acceptable” gender roles. Speaking particularly about masculinities, Kimmel (1992) has suggested that the media functions as one of the key elements in presenting “acceptable” ways of being men. Allen (2003) argues that the normative presentations of masculinities and femininities in the media are those that privilege heterosexuality, and the active male/passive female binary. Similarly, Durham and Kellner (2001) relate how media products provide materials from which we forge our notions of what it means to be heterosexual, homosexual, women or men. In terms of how hetero-femininities are presented in the media, I take MacDonald's (1995) position who claims that definitions of femininity: have historically been much more integral to the formation of identity for women than for men. If women had defined for themselves the ideals of their bodily shape or decoration, this would not be problematic. It is the denial of this right in the history of Western cultural representation, in medical practice, and in the multi-billion dollar pornography, fashion and cosmetic industries, that has

granted women only squatters' rights to their own bodies (1995, 193).

However, as I will discuss below, most editors did not see their magazines as obligated to playing any role in transformation. Instead, most understood social responsibility as a "political" issue, and magazines were located as both objective and neutral in their contents. The prevailing views expressed in the interviews with editors therefore centered on notions of objectivity and neutrality, which I discuss below.

Magazines as neutral and objective

The dominant view in interviews was that magazines were not "political" but subscribed to particular notions of objectivity and neutrality:

It's not the job of the media to fight racism, sexism, homophobia, HIV/AIDS, poverty, TB or whatever. The media plays an important social role but it does not play judge and jury to whatever happens in society. We do have a responsibility to highlight and discuss social phenomena, but ultimately we afford the reader the respect to make her own judgments and opinions. The role that the media occupies – that fourth estate position we occupy – is one that is free from bias and judgment.

This view, articulated by a white female editor of a woman's magazine, was common in interviews with editors. However, it is also a view that has been long been problematised. Unlike the view of the editor above that the media might "highlight and discuss social phenomena", Stuart Hall (1992) has argued that the media defines, not merely produces, "reality". Hall explains how the active work of selecting, presenting, structuring and shaping material in media content does not merely reflect "an already-existing meaning" but instead is the practice of "*making things mean*" (cited in Braude, 1999, 18, emphasis in original). Nevertheless, this was not the view of the editors I interviewed and they overwhelmingly took the position that their magazines reflected neutrality and objectivity. As a white male editor of a men's magazine related:

I'm uncomfortable with magazines supposed role in nation-building. Magazines are products, like chocolate bars. Magazines are profit-making products; they are not there for nation-building. Magazines do not have to be there for the betterment of society. But they also cannot be guided by commercial gain. Too much emphasis on products playing a role in nation-building when magazines have a massive responsibility to shareholders.

Instead, editors understood magazines to be a mode of entertainment, as one white female editor put it:

They are there to amuse, inform and entertain people no matter what the subject. A magazine's role is to discuss issues and explain/break-down arguments that help readers make an informed decision on their own. People's perceptions may not be changed by what they read in magazines, but at least they have more info at their disposal to inform/challenge those perceptions, whatever they may be.

In other words, magazines provide information that readers can choose to discard or utilise. Again, editors understand this information to be neutral and objective, even though, as the same interviewee argues later, "social, political and economic changes all play a distinctive role in moving the magazine and its readership in particular directions." But another black female editor believed that magazines should steer away from "politics" entirely, stating that "as a glossy women's magazine, we cannot at any stage be seen to be political, as we are not here to engender change, but to inspire." Again, the overriding discourse in editors' opinions was that their magazines always aimed to be neutral and objective, in terms of the types of material included on racism, homophobia, HIV/AIDS, sexism or poverty for instance, or in the decisions to exclude material of this type altogether.

There was also the view that it was hard to be socially responsible in South Africa when the global market plays a huge role in determining what goes into editorialised versions local magazines. The global context of magazine production shaped and framed the choices around which South African stories could be published and which stories would be most "marketable".

A white male deputy editor of a men's magazine highlighted this:

Our aim is teaching and learning from the American. Our stories are of such a global brand. We have to give it a South African spin – it's never around being socially responsible. It's about trying to solve a guy's problem. We're about day-to-day things, rather than building the nation's conscience. It's not about the broader goals of social justice. We are also tightly controlled as a brand internationally. It always comes back to how useful the info is to the reader; how will it help him in his life. We very rarely approach things to do with society. We'd never run an HIV/AIDS story and we are a health magazine. We are working on it now. We also ran a big rape feature, all with very personal stories, but the drive was this: how can you as a man respond in an environment where rape and sexual violence is so prevalent?

This view illustrates the supposedly "apolitical" framework preferred by the magazine. Men's problems are not understood to be social problems, and hence men must individually work them out. In other words, this magazine, targeted at male readers, clearly does not represent questions around for example, gender violence, fatherhood or HIV/AIDS as political questions requiring political solutions. Instead, such questions are presented as individual problems requiring individual solutions. The focus is on individual men's "day-to-day problems", which is understood as unrelated to more overtly political questions around "building the nation's conscience" and feeding into social change.

In terms of social transformation in which women and other marginalised groups, such as gay and lesbian South Africans, are able to experience a more meaningful "democracy", questions of sexualities are key. The following discussion reflects why neutrality isn't possible.

Gender and Sexuality

In my interviews with editors, a central element of the version of (hetero)masculinity privileged in the magazines is the construction of femininity. One

white male editor of a men's magazine related that while women are often professional sources,

The male gaze is very present. Men will buy our magazine partly because there are beautiful women in it. We give readers what they find attractive (not fat women). There is international control over what you publish. The most enlightened man will enjoy looking at beautiful women – a skinny, slight creature. She may not be Kate Moss, but it's ok if it's J-Lo. Women are featured as objects of desire in men's magazines.



"Skinny slight creatures"

This comment suggests that there is a particular version of femininity privileged in the world of South African men's magazines and these often mirror Western beauty ideals. It is assumed that all "enlightened" males are heterosexual, and that all of them find a particular type of woman attractive – "skinny, slight creature(s)". A woman who is not skinny and slight, who does not fit into this limited construction of femininity, is understood as unattractive to heterosexual men and therefore is a risk to feature as a model in men's magazines. "Fat" women, in the

words of the interviewee above, are not attractive, despite the evidence that many societies around the world (including African) have long histories in which plumper women have been constructed as desirable. This preference for particular types of feminine representations again articulates a political position, one that sees Western presentations of beauty as superior within a global market.

Other male editors appeared to agree with this view. Here *Blink's* editor seemed to agree with the dominant view that women are mostly presented for the male gaze:

There are many reasons for women being represented through men's eyes. Our editorial staff is mostly female. The creative input comes from women. I am conscious of these things – models are comfortable with the shoots.

Yet another white male editor presented the view that men's magazines present women through the male gaze and that this was not something to be questioned or challenged:

Women are represented from the perspective of the male gaze. It is a mistake to believe that women and sexuality do not preoccupy men most of the time. This is what men spend most of their time thinking about.

While male editors – across racial divisions – appeared to be aware of some of the ways in which men's magazines often present women as sexual objects in, the two female editors in my interviews rejected this notion of women as sexual objects in women's magazines. This reflects that there was at least some awareness of – and discomfort around – the "politics" of representing women as sexual objects. One black female editor argued:

Women's magazines, especially within Media24, have always reflected women through women's eyes. There is never any doubt about that and I think more and more women's magazines on the shelf are all about women and reflect us absolutely through own eyes.

A white female editor responded to my question on the ways in which women are presented in women's

magazines by stating "women wouldn't buy them. Women are not stupid" to buy magazines in which they are presented from the perspective of the male gaze.



Women's magazines more likely to represent women their own eyes.

Underlining the point by Durham and Kellner (2001) that media products provide the scripts from which people forge their sexualities for instance, were the white male editors of two of the most popular men's magazines in the country explaining that their magazines targeted heterosexual customers:

We are not a homophobic publication *but* we make fun, joking reference to this. There seems to be a male homophobic trend, male humour. We are in line with being seen to encourage tolerance in South Africa but our readers are mostly heterosexual (my emphasis in italics).

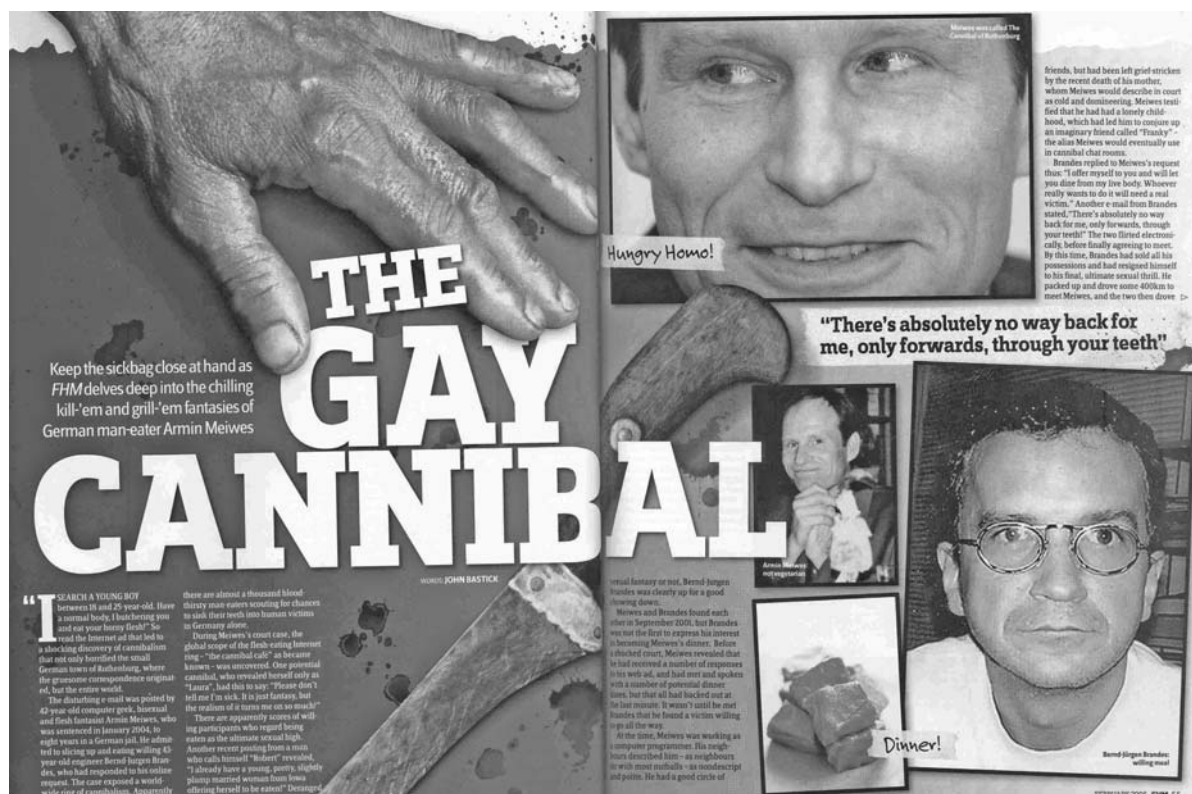
In addition, if not discussed in a joking manner, the topic of homosexuality is almost completely ignored, again reinforcing heterosexuality and pointing to the impossibility of ever producing a neutral publication. Another white male deputy editor of a men's magazine narrated for example that his

magazine “does not feel it has an obligation to cover homosexuality” in its contents:

Our magazine has a high gay readership but regardless of the story being run, it always has a heterosexual dent. I don't think *our magazine* would ever run a how-to sex story on homosexual sex. But that's not to say the magazine only ever covers things conventionally associated with straight men. For instance we have a big grooming, fashion, nutrition and weightloss focus. These would conventionally have been regarded as more the domain of the gay readership. But they are issues now which all men look for advice on. The fact that *our magazine* has a gay readership means the content mix is working for that readership, but the magazine has never actively sought out that market or addressed it directly (my emphasis).

Again, the above view reflects a political stance where editors, based on their readerships' assumed heterosexualities, deliberately take the position to not address their homosexual readers. This is not a neutral stance. Similarly, a black female editor reverted to notions of neutrality and objectivity in her view that women's magazines present a range of sexualities on equal terms. Again, heteronormative discourses – believed to be neutral and objective – are employed, invisibilising rampant homophobia in our society:

Our readers don't ever have to be “educated” when it comes to these matters – they know their minds. It's therefore not for us to ever be prescriptive. We simply report on all aspects of sexuality, as this is part of normal everyday life in South Africa and in the rest of the world (my emphasis).



Men's magazines tend to at best make a joke of homosexuality, and worse, perpetuate negative perceptions. (FHM, Feb 2005)

There were challenges to the consensus that magazines had no business messing with the “political” and these mostly came from the black male editor of *Blink* magazine. I discuss these below.

Challenges to the dominant view

One white male editor noted that “magazines do have a huge role to play in nation building. They simply have not been creative enough in trying to find ways to explore that and write about it.” Ex-editor of *Blink*, Siphwe Mpye, however, connected constructions of (black) masculinities to gender violence and highlighted the ways in which men’s magazines can act responsibly by playing a role in raising these connections for their readers. He argues that

Nation-building relates to relationships between women and men. Consider the baggage black men have had -abuse, alienation. We have a responsibility to reflect a different kind of man who is not intimidated by women, not an absent father, protects his family – this will go a long way towards nation-building. We have lots of female readers who encourage us. They say that we give insight into their problems with men. We present a general idea of what women go through. We get debates and topics out there and lots of insight will happen outside of the magazine. We also deal with hard issues, such as AIDS, abuse and other harder issues (my emphasis).

He also linked the notion of magazines’ social responsibility to racism:

Race issues are a huge preoccupation because too often people strive to pretend that race issues do not exist. There is a sense that we should move on – this is dangerous. We need to find ways of dealing with racism. The subtle things need to be dealt with. *Magazines* in our own way, need to conscientise readers and society in general. Then we would be doing our part (my emphasis).

In terms of homosexuality, Mpye challenged the dominant assumption that readerships were heterosexual and that the magazines only include content relevant to these readers. Men’s magazines, according to Mpye, have a responsibility to

educate readers about homosexuality:

We most definitely have an obligation to educate readers about homosexuality. A lot of gay men can identify although the tone of the magazine is heterosexual. *It has* a lot to do with male identities – men are grappling with who they are. It’s an exciting time for masculinity – before there was a focus on women and women’s issues. Rightfully so. Masculinity is now largely a reaction to women’s emancipation. Men were always the hunters. Men have to adapt. Conversely, all these different types of men have emerged. *Blink has* a political conscience. We represent this kind of spirit (my emphasis).

A white male editor, however, highlighted the difficulties in talking about issues such as racism, sexuality and HIV/AIDS in magazines targeting white readers:

In terms of HIV/AIDS and racism, it’s hard to separate oneself from the magazine. *Our magazine* has never considered it – never felt any responsibility to run any story. I think it is changing. Magazines have had to find fresh ways to approach things like HIV. It is no longer about big shocking stories, but about how it is an ordinary everyday part of our lives.

While the most challenging points of view on presentations of masculinities and media social responsibility came from the black male editor of *Blink* magazine, it is unfortunate that this magazine stopped publishing in late 2006. My interview with Siphwe Mpye, ex-editor of *Blink* magazine, suggests that his provocative vision did not produce positive, sustainable results in the world of magazines, which operate on maximising profits. It seems that challenging readers to think more critically about the social context in which they find themselves does not sell magazines. As one white male editor pointed out:

Magazines that have tried to put more into their editorial mix often get labelled ‘too worthy’ or just ‘boring’, like *Marie Claire* and *Fair Lady*. *You-Drum*, *Huisgenoot* has done a huge amount with their readership in terms of social awareness in the last year. But magazines tread a fine line between being slick and serious, glam and heartfelt, titillating and earnest, self-involved and community minded. The

rampant consumer in our readerships and advertising base generally wins the battle.

The collapse of *Blink* magazine demonstrates that the inclusion of features aiming to subvert traditional ideas of (black) masculinities as unemotional, absent fathers, highlighting the prevalence of

HIV/AIDS and male violence against women and children – content usually only found in women's magazines – did not interest black male readers enough to continue buying the magazine. A more thorough analysis of the ways in which *Blink* magazine presents gender, sexuality and race to their readers I have discussed elsewhere.

Loving abused women

Nhlanelo Hlongwane revisits some of the women he has loved, and confronts the thorns among the roses of his walk down tainted lovers' paradise.

As a student, I remember most vividly Nation of Islam's Minister Louis Farrakhan saying in one of his speeches, that if you rape a woman, you basically kill and murder something inside her, and that she won't heal unless God Himself intervenes.

During that time, it seemed as if just about every woman I met had been violated at some point in her life. Through these women, I became aware of man as a sexual predator and a molester, an aspect of man I had not known before.

Over the years, music has helped bring me some perspective and healing, as one affected. For me U2's *Achtung Baby* allowed me to begin understanding life on the edge.

Their twisted tongue-in-cheek lyrics, became the soundtrack of many of my meditations and rage at what other men had done to the women I came to love.

As hard as I tried, I never could take away all of their deep sadness. And so lyrics from songs like "So crust", "Ultraviolet", "Acrobat" and "Love is blindness" spoke to my anger and helped colour my own morbid mood!

*"Don't believe what you hear, don't believe what you see.
You just close your eyes, you can feel the enemy.
When I first met you girl you had fire in your soul.
What happened, your face all melted in mine?"*
"Acrobat"

In whispers and long empty stares, girlfriends and lovers told me about girls who had their childhoods stolen from them. They unveiled a dark world of pain, depression and torture.

I was confused and angry to learn that so many of the women who I had come to know, and love, had been raped as children, and as young women. I became introduced to the world of incest, abuse and sexual offenders. I felt guilty for being male, I felt responsible. I wished I could have been there for all of them to prevent it all from happening. I took it all on, I felt hopeless. I felt ashamed.

I couldn't understand how they could speak, how they could be, how they could carry on with the weight of their burden. I was a student in America at the time and as any idealistic student who dreamt of changing the world, I spoke to my mom about my devastation. She had just come back from visiting home and began to tell me that while she was there, South African children were protesting in the streets against child abuse!

She was repeatedly raped at knife-point by her step-brother. Intervention didn't happen until her brothers happened on them. She had been choked unconscious at the time.

My world spun from under my feet. I was cold and numb. My innocence was lost. I hadn't imagined child abuse to be an American thing only, but I didn't think that the madness was universal, and that groups of children, in my own country, were taking to the streets in protest against it! That moment defined me.

*"Oh sugar don't you cry,
Oh child wipe the tears from your eyes.
You know I need you to be strong,
The day is as dark as the night is long."*
"Ultraviolet"

There is Ntombenke, a shy young engineering student in her early 20s. I met her while living in Yeoville. She was generally withdrawn but put up a brave face for her little sister whom she was looking after and sending to school. If you took the time to see, Ntombenke was shell-shocked from her rite of passage into womanhood. She's a multiple rape survivor. She was raped by someone who later became an SAABC presenter. After her physical rape, she was further tortured emotionally by the thought that she might see him in her living room, or possibly hear his voice from the kitchen, every time she turned on her TV.

"I would get so mad seeing him smiling on TV as though he did nothing, like he didn't leave a trail of destruction behind him!" She never pointed him out to me for fear of what I might do, and rightly so! Her wound remained open, constantly festering and unable to heal.

She tells me he died a few years ago. Even after learning that, I had this yearning to dig him up, just to kill him again.

"After the rape I became aggressive, and I found I couldn't relate to my parents anymore. I became overly protective of my little sister because I never wanted what happened to me to happen to her". When it nearly did, at the hands of her older sister's boyfriend, she was able to respond; "I am glad that I knew the signs and I got her to talk to me and that's when she started to live with me."

*"Sometimes I feel like, I don't know.
Sometimes I feel like checking out.
I want to get it right,
I can't always be strong
And loving won't be long."*
"Ultraviolet"

I met Ntombenke at a film conference I dropped in on in Cape Town. She was (wo)maning one of the stands there and our eyes met as I was making my rounds among the buyers and sellers. We later shared a split at the end of the day's session. I quickly discovered that she was a passionate and spirited artist. It wasn't until she moved to Yeoville some years later that I got the chance to know her whole story. She was repeatedly raped at knife-point by her step-brother.

Intervention didn't happen until her brother and other step-brother happened on them. She had been choked unconscious at the time.

Even though she has always been "a rebel and a tomboy", after her rape, she also became aggressive. "I became back wild. I started drinking, smoking weed and got in with the wrong crowd because I felt safer with them."

She felt betrayed by her brother and step-brother who forced her to disclose to her mother and step-father.

Blink, which stopped publishing in late 2006, offered men a different perspective than most men's magazines (Blink August 2005, 40-41)

In conclusion, an overriding theme in my interviews with the editors of *Men's Health*, *FHM*, *Fair Lady* and *True Love*, was the notion that their magazines are both neutral and objective. Editors appeared to believe that it is not the role of magazines to contribute towards social change – they aim to produce magazines that fit comfortably into and reflect existing societal norms rather than challenge social norms. Social responsibility and nation-building were believed to be "political" endeavours understood to be completely separate from the magazines' primary objective to accumulate profits. However, there were challenges to this understanding. The editor of *Blink* magazine saw

his magazine as taking a stance position on issues related to gender-based

violence, racism, HIV/AIDS, masculinities and so on. He thought that magazines could play an important role in transformation. And while the other editors generally felt that their magazines maintained neutrality and objectivity by not overtly challenging the status quo, this stance in itself was not understood to be a political one which helps to maintain and reinforce

Notes

¹ (SAARF, 2003-2005 South African Advertising and Research Foundation. (2003). Email communication with Tshifhiwa Mulaudzi, Technical Support Executive at SAARF

inequalities around gender, sexuality, HIV/AIDS and so on in South Africa.

There were signs of a slightly deeper understanding of the political in discussions around representations of women – presumably linked to almost 50 years of feminist activism and theorising about representations of women. But except for FHM, the declining readerships (SAARF, 2003-2005¹) for *Men's Health*, *True Love*, *Femina* and *Fair Lady* reflect that editors are not connecting with their readers as comfortably as they suggest in their interviews. It isn't clear whether an inclusion of articles which challenge the status quo might work better in the existing magazines, if these were offered to readers. But there are real risks involved in producing articles that challenge the status quo as the demise of *Blink* seems to illustrate. Given *Blink's* experience, alongside the fact that the South African market for magazines is just a microcosm of the global capitalist economic system, it seems unlikely that local editors are likely to change their existing strategies to follow *Blink's* lead. In addition, the sudden inclusion of features about socio-political challenges could result in a further decline of readerships and ultimately a loss in profits. At the same time, declining readerships do suggest that editors need to consider a change in strategy.

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