



Creating Images of Fashion: Consumer Magazines and American Competition in Britain, 1910-1940

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In this essay, we explore the development of consumer fashion magazines in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century. Leading British magazine publishers, led by Alfred Harmsworth's Amalgamated Press, successfully exploited the low-price weekly magazine aimed at homemakers, using the newly developed, capital-intensive printing technology. American firms, such as Condé Nast and Hearst's National Magazine Company successfully introduced high-quality, high-price fortnightly and monthly titles such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. Despite a tradition of producing high-quality fashion magazines during the nineteenth century, British publishers' titles during the early twentieth century did not compete directly with those from American firms. Thus, the competing market-positioning strategies partitioned the fashion magazine market, rather than simply segmenting it. The British editorial style emphasized domesticity, while the American publishers cultivated aspirational consumerism. These approaches were fundamental in shaping the images of fashion presented to British women until the mid-twentieth century.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century and beyond, periodical publishing constituted one of the leading sectors of the British economy. In Alfred D. Chandler, Jr.'s list of the two hundred largest firms in Britain for 1930, printing and publishing companies feature far more prominently

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than they do in either the United States or Germany.¹ Developed initially by the likes of George Newnes, Alfred Harmsworth, and Cyril Arthur Pearson, these publishing groups exploited the technological breakthroughs of the late nineteenth century, which transformed printing into a modern mass-production industry, and in so doing, provided British investors with an enduring stream of profits throughout the generally bleak conditions of the interwar years.²

The bedrock of these publishing groups was the daily newspaper. A product of the era of New Journalism, titles such as the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Herald*, and Lord Beaverbrook's *Daily Express*, together with their popular Sunday counterparts, provided a predominantly male readership with a cheap but highly valued distraction from clerical and industrial drudgery.³ The circulation of daily newspapers in Britain rose from 3.1 million in 1918 to 10.6 million in 1939.⁴ The production and sale of newspapers constituted the core activity of organizations such as the Harmsworth and Beaverbrook groups, but the industry as a whole also developed a strong portfolio of magazine titles.⁵ Alfred Harmsworth

¹ Chandler's list of the two hundred largest industrial enterprises in Great Britain, ranked by market value of shares, in 1930 includes ten printing and publishing firms, of which nine were engaged in the publishing of newspapers and periodicals; see Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), Appendix B.2.

² Youssef Cassis notes that Lord Rothermere's (Harold Harmsworth) Associated Press generated £1.2 million in profits between 1927 and 1929, Britain's nineteenth largest source of profits at that time; see Youssef Cassis, *Big Business: The European Experience in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, U.K., 1997), Table 4.2.

³ Surveys undertaken in the mid-1930s by the London Press Exchange and the Incorporated Society of British Advertisers found the readership of the popular newspapers weighted toward men, 11:9. Women readers predominated in the readership of the pictorial papers; see Political and Economic Planning, *Report on the British Press* (London, 1938), 228.

⁴ Charles Wilson, *First with the News: The History of W. H. Smith, 1792-1972* (London, 1985), 322.

⁵ Three London-based organizations dominated the publishing of consumer magazines in Britain between the two world wars. In 1926, the Berry brothers' Allied Newspapers bought the largest, Amalgamated Press, created in 1902 by the Harmsworth brothers. Thereafter the Harmsworth Group concentrated on publishing newspapers. The Berry Group also published a wide range of newspapers, although the interests of the two leading figures divided in 1937, with Amalgamated Press becoming part of Lord Camrose's Group, which continued to publish the *Daily Telegraph*, *Morning Post*, and *Financial Times*. After the death of C. Arthur Pearson in 1921, the magazine interests of George Newnes and C. Arthur Pearson were combined. Newnes' interest in newspapers ended in 1908 when he sold his only title, the *Westminster Gazette*, which he had

launched his career in newspapers by using the profits from a cluster of popular magazines, most of which were weekly titles that sold for a penny or less. As the twentieth century progressed, these popular magazines came to form a significant component of the publishing empires controlled by the Fleet Street press barons.

While newspaper publishing remained an entirely domestic affair in Britain before the Second World War, the consumer magazine branch of the industry became the subject of foreign competition. Between 1882 and 1896, an English-language edition of France's reigning fashion journal, *Le Moniteur de la Mode*, was available for those who required information on the latest fashion trends across the English Channel.⁶ A more enduring source of competition, however, began in 1910, when William Randolph Hearst set up the National Magazine Company in London's West End.

Before the First World War was out, compatriot and competitor Condé Nast had emulated Hearst.⁷ Together, these two American enterprises developed a successful competitive strategy within the British market for consumer magazines that, we argue, had a marked impact on the structure of the British market for fashion magazines (broadly defined) for the next two decades.

Most credit the New Journalism revolution in Britain's publishing industry to Harmsworth's chief rival in the magazine publishing industry, George Newnes, who launched the highly contagious *Tit-Bits* magazine in

launched in 1893; Pearson launched the halfpenny *Daily Express* in 1900, and acquired a variety of other newspaper interests thereafter, the last of which were sold in 1912. For these two, see *Dictionary of Business Biography: A Biographical Dictionary of Business Leaders Active in Britain in the Period 1860-1980*, s.v. "George Newnes, 1854-1910" and "Cyril Arthur Pearson, 1866-1921." Thus, by the interwar period the Newnes-Pearson Group operated as a magazine and book publishing concern, devoid of any newspaper interests. The Odhams Group had begun as a printing, rather than a publishing, concern; see W. J. B. Odhams, *The Business and I* (London, 1935). In 1906, it began printing the popular magazine *John Bull* and in 1920 assumed control of the publication of this journal. Under the guidance of Lord Southwood, Odhams expanded rapidly between the wars, developing a string of periodicals and becoming responsible for the publication of two leading national newspapers, the *Daily Herald* and the *People*, under somewhat complicated ownership terms. Outside of London, the combination of D. C. Thompson & Co., Ltd. and J. Leng & Co., Ltd. of Dundee formed the most important periodical publishing group. This group published a number of Scottish-based newspapers and a wide range of mainly low-priced periodicals. For a more detailed overview of the British Press in 1938, see Political and Economic Planning, "Report on the British Press," 96-113.

⁶ Cynthia L. White, *Women's Magazines, 1693-1968* (London, 1970), 80.

⁷ Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, Ill., 1956), 258-59.

1881 (see Figure 1).⁸ *Tit-Bits* found a ready audience among industrial workers, whose brief interludes of rest and travel could be exploited, as the manufacturers of cigarettes also discovered, with cheap, habit-forming products. Alfred Harmsworth understood the consumer's desire for publications of this kind, along with the allied distractions of competitions and other light-hearted diversions, and was willing to back his instincts with a range of "me-too" products supported by extensive marketing and sales promotion.⁹ His riposte to Newnes' *Tit-Bits*, the clumsily titled *Answers to Correspondents*, which he launched in 1888, boasted nothing by way of originality other than Harmsworth's own extraordinary drive and winning personality.¹⁰

As he extended his reach, one demographic group provided Harmsworth with a rich source of poor customers—Britain's children. In his creation of the weekly periodical *Comic Cuts*, Harmsworth found the potential for substantial profits in the smallest of small change by providing the country's youth with its first experience of the comic strip. It was with women, however, that the future press lord sensed the most lucrative, and untapped, market lay. In November 1891, the year after his launch of *Comic Cuts*, Harmsworth and his more business-savvy brother Harold, set up the Periodical Publishing Company. This new organization's first offering was *Forget-Me-Not*, a penny weekly aimed at the female market. Lee Thompson comments that the journal's "outlook was improving, stressing etiquette and propriety, well in step with the moral tone prevalent in the fifty-fourth year of Queen Victoria's reign," and was, he notes, a considerably better value than rivals such as *The Lady's Pictorial* and *The Queen*.¹¹

Throughout the 1890s, Harmsworth's publishing operations grew apace. In March 1895, unashamedly mimicking his main rival once again, Harmsworth launched *Home Chat* as a penny weekly competitor to George Newnes' sixpenny monthly *Home Notes*. Cynthia White observes that *Home Chat* "proved to be lively, entertaining and above all practical, covering as far as possible all the interests and occupations of the home-

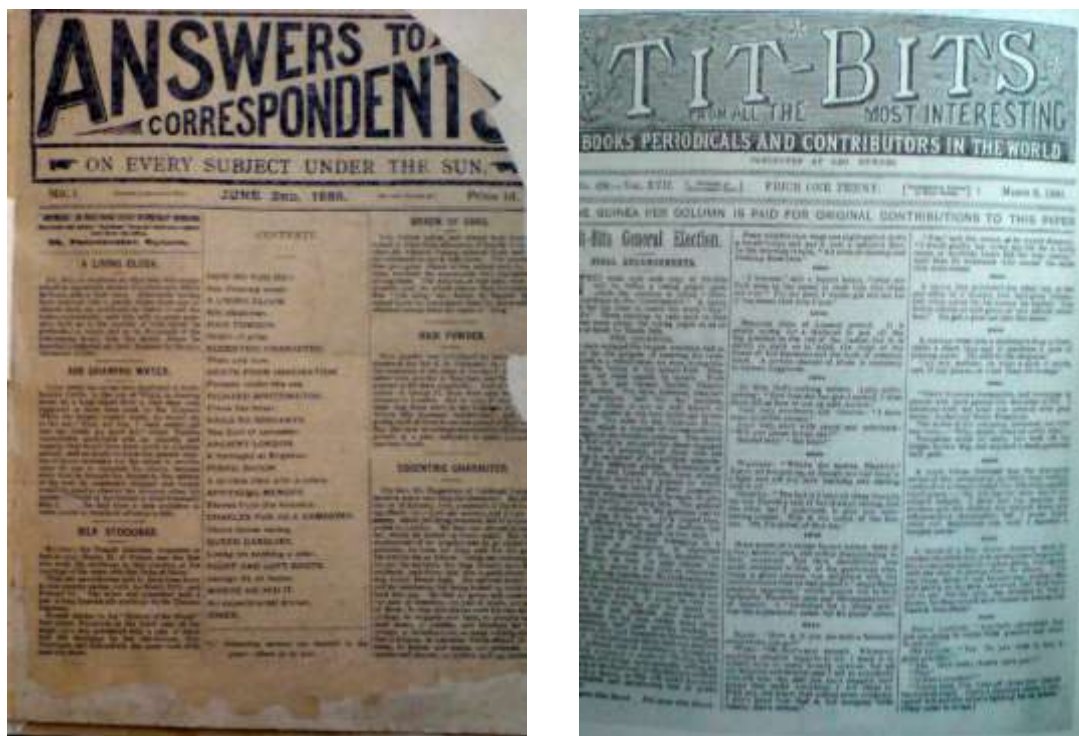
⁸ Kate Jackson, *George Newnes and the New Journalism in Britain, 1880-1910* (Aldershot, 2001).

⁹ Harmsworth's feel for popular sentiment was one of his principal talents, as highlighted by Colin Seymour-Ure in "Northcliffe's Legacy," in *Northcliffe's Legacy: Aspects of the British Popular Press, 1896-1996*, ed. Peter Catterall, Colin Seymour-Ure, and Adrian Smith (Basingstoke, 2000), 9.

¹⁰ Reginald Pound and Geoffrey Harmsworth, *Northcliffe* (London, 1959), 81-86.

¹¹ Lee Thompson, *Northcliffe: Press Baron in Politics, 1865-1922* (London, 2000), 15.

FIGURE 1



Vol.1, No. 1 of *Answers to Correspondents* and *Tit-Bits*

Source: Author’s photographic collection. It is interesting to note that *Answers to Correspondents*, Vol. 1, No. 1 was not the first issue printed. No. 3 was printed first to give the illusion that it was a response to previous questions. Vol. 1 was printed at the end of the year along with No. 2 for collectors to bind into their collections.

loving woman and setting new standards of service.”¹² The magazine’s launch created a frenzy of interest, and circulation had reached 186,000 within three months.¹³ *Home Chat* was Harmsworth’s fourteenth successfully published title; by 1902 the Harmsworth brothers had formed the Amalgamated Press as a holding company for their magazine publishing interests, boasting a capital of £1.3 million.¹⁴

Magazines such as *Forget-Me-Not* and *Home Chat* helped to forge a particular set of features that emerged as typical characteristics of the

¹² White, *Women’s Magazines*, 76.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁴ George Dilnot, *The Romance of the Amalgamated Press* (London, 1925), 35.

British women's periodical press between the two world wars. The penny weekly, produced using the innovative letterpress technology and printed on a quality of newsprint that compared favorably with daily newspapers, provided its female consumers with an affordable luxury, or at least semi-luxury, item. Adopting an approach to market positioning that could be equated with Cliff Bowman's hybrid strategy, Harmsworth led Britain's popular magazine industry along a specific path that rested the magazines' competitive strength on the ability to provide consumers with a more than adequate product, available for the lowest cover price that the prevailing printing technology could allow.¹⁵

The impact of the Harmsworth business strategy on the images of fashion presented to British women is perfectly exemplified by the editorial preface from the first issue of Harmsworth's most enduring weekly journal. Launched in November 1911, *Woman's Weekly* stated boldly that its fashions, ignoring the extremes of taste, consisted of "the ordinary garments which will be worn by the average woman," supplemented by a complete wardrobe of patterns for home dressmaking, which readers could collect over several months (see Figure 2).¹⁶

The Harmsworth-style popular weeklies succeeded in significantly extending the boundaries of the market for women's magazines. In the first half of the nineteenth century publishers had aimed the women's periodical press, whether weekly or monthly, almost exclusively at the leisured class of British society. In 1852, Samuel Beeton introduced what is acknowledged to be the first low-price monthly magazine aimed at middle class women. *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* retailed for a price of two pence, comparing favorably with the customary cover price for a monthly magazine of one shilling. But, as Kathryn Hughes has observed, "The masterstroke of the magazine . . . was its coverage of fashion."¹⁷ By the 1860s, each issue featured a colored plate showing "anatomically impossible young women crammed into the latest Parisian fashion. This was accompanied by a paper pattern and detailed instructions on how to make the item at home." Beeton, together with his wife Isabella, continued to develop new titles for the women's market until his financial circumstances unraveled in the wake of the Overend, Gurney bank collapse in the mid-1860s. From that point, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* seems to have fallen into disrepute—the British Library classified later editions as pornograph as a result of the risqué correspondence material it printed.

¹⁵ Cliff Bowman, *Strategy in Practice* (Harlow, 1998), Chapter 2.

¹⁶ White, *Women's Magazines*, 90.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44; "Zeal and Softness," *Guardian Review*, 20 Dec. 2008, p. 16.

FIGURE 2



Woman's Weekly, 18 Oct. 1919

Source: Author's photographic collection.

One of Beeton's titles that endured well into the twentieth century, however, was *The Queen*. Launched in 1861, this publication, intended as a high-class newspaper for domesticated women, included a blunt statement in the first issue: "When we write for women we write for the home."¹⁸ By the second decade of the twentieth century, *The Queen* was among a number of quality women's magazines whose focus on high society was becoming increasingly anachronistic in the era of the mass consumer. Nevertheless, the focus on women as creatures of domesticity continued to pervade the sector as a whole, even after the creation of penny weeklies had brought a far greater range of women within the compass of the popular magazine industry. In Cynthia White's account of the growth of women's periodicals between the wars, she strongly emphasizes the retrogressive impact of popular magazines on the position of women. She asserts:

¹⁸ Cited in White, *Women's Magazines*, 50.

Editors expatiated in unison on the sacrificial joys of being a wife and mother. They elevated housewifery into a craft, gave it the status of a profession, and sold it to readers on the most attractive of terms, thereby nullifying all that had been achieved by the Women's Rights Movement in securing greater social freedom for women, and letting slip the opportunities opening up for them as a result of the war.¹⁹

Such attitudes toward British female magazine consumers were not universal, however. The growing obsolescence of the traditional quality monthly magazine created a market opportunity over which the Harmsworth-style press, with its focus on weekly journals, exerted less sway. In this market segment, American firms made much of the running, and the lure of fashion provided a key lever used to attract new readers. Condé Nast engineered the first successful transfer of an existing American title into the British publishing scene.²⁰ At the height of the First World War in 1916, Nast launched *UK Vogue*; according to Kerstan Cohen, this was the first-ever international edition of a consumer magazine tailored to a foreign market.²¹ Nast had purchased the magazine in 1909, and he launched its colorful images at the fashion-conscious women of Britain with the following philosophy: "America believes in the higher education of women as does no other country on earth. She knows perfectly well that marriage and motherhood, paramount as they are, are not to be the whole of a girl's life. . . ." He concluded with the observation, "She has been given an abundance of surplus time and energy. . . . Do we realise it in England?"²²

Launched as a fortnightly magazine selling for one shilling, *Vogue* was a true luxury item, offering its readers 120 glossy pages plus a color supplement, and it included material beyond fashion, covering a wide range of subjects written to a high literary standard (see Figure 3). Its publisher's approach to business strategy mirrored *Vogue's* novel appearance and contents. The commercial success of Condé Nast's magazine depended critically on its ability to broker a successful marriage between its readership and its advertisers, to an extent never before attempted in Britain. David Reed has pointed out that in 1930, the circulation of American *Vogue* was just 134,000, but the revenues generated by advertising during the year were in excess of \$3 million.²³

¹⁹ White, *Women's Magazines*, 104.

²⁰ Caroline Seeborn makes this claim; see *The Man Who Was Vogue: The Life and Times of Condé Nast* (New York, 1982).

²¹ *International Directory of Corporate Histories*, s.v. "The Condé Nast Publications Inc."

²² Quoted in White, *Women's Magazines*, 91.

²³ David Reed, *The Popular Magazine in Britain and the United States, 1880-1960* (London, 1997), 152-53.

The success of *Vogue* thus depended upon cultivating a readership that was both intelligent and aspiring, one that had the capacity to translate its desires into effective demand for high value consumer goods.

FIGURE 3



Vogue (British Vogue), 13 Nov. 1935

Source: Author's photographic collection. *Vogue* was printed on much better quality paper than woman's weekly magazines, using high-quality letterpress and lithography.

Nast followed up his initial incursion into the British magazine market in 1920 with the launch of *House and Garden*, which he had bought in 1915. In extending fashionable consumerism to the home, he quickly found himself in competition with another American publishing entrepreneur, William Randolph Hearst. Hearst had first extended his publishing interests to Britain in 1910 when he purchased the literary *Nash's Magazine* and set up the National Magazine Company.²⁴ *Nash's Magazine*

²⁴ David Nasaw, *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* (Boston, Mass., 2000), 349.

developed successfully during the 1910s by paying high fees and offering long contracts to leading authors of fiction, raising its circulation to 220,000 copies. By 1921, it had provided Hearst's British-based organization with a residual profit sufficient to support the launch of a local edition of the American parent company's *Good Housekeeping* magazine (see Figure 4).²⁵ This magazine presented British readers with a new, professional approach to issues of household management, and in 1924, it opened the *Good Housekeeping* Institute, providing one of the earliest forms of consumer advice and protection available in the United Kingdom.²⁶

FIGURE 4



Good Housekeeping, May 1939

Source: Author's photographic collection.

²⁵ Alice Head, *It Could Never Have Happened* (London, 1939), 53-62.

²⁶ Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Search for a Historical Movement* (Cambridge, England, 2003), 172.

Little attempt seems to have been made on behalf of British magazine publishers to compete directly with the high-quality, high-price strategy developed by the American interlopers during the 1920s. Cynthia White notes that when Amalgamated Press launched the monthly *Woman's Journal* in 1927, which did cater to more affluent readers, "The image of home life it projected was cosy and sentimental" rather than challenging or aspirational.²⁷ The same firm's launch the following year, of *Woman and Home*, which developed into Britain's most popular monthly women's magazine between the wars, provided no more than a stable mate for the readers of *Woman's Weekly*. Newnes put out the monthly *Modern Woman* in 1925, while the more quality-conscious Odhams Press launched *Everywoman* the following year, but neither were effective competitors to *Vogue*, and Odhams scored its most conspicuous success in the women's sector with the weekly *Woman* magazine, which it successfully brought to market in 1937.

The National Magazine Company added a more fashion-oriented monthly to compete against *Vogue* when it launched a British edition of *Harper's Bazaar* in 1929. By the 1930s, however, the vulnerability of a strategy that relied heavily on advertising revenues to cover production costs became apparent. The depression in America forced the U.K. arm of Condé Nast to seek financial support from Amalgamated Press in 1933, and the British firm acquired full control of the operation following Nast's death in 1942. Hearst, too, experienced severe financial difficulties during this period, and a sharp decline in advertising revenues in the late 1930s forced the National Magazine Company to close *Nash's Magazine* shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War.²⁸ By 1940, therefore, the first wave of American competition in the British periodical publishing sector had effectively been brought to an end.

During the early interwar years, both Condé Nast and the National Magazine Company were able to develop a successful business strategy built around the emergence of a consumer culture that saw a segment of the British population copying trends that had already become established in the United States, where consumerism and salesmanship were far more developed.²⁹ As a result, the images of fashion that were presented to the British public through the medium of popular consumer magazines between the wars can be seen, at least in part, as reflecting the competing needs of different publishers' market-positioning strategies. The less challenging and aspirational stance toward their readership adopted by

²⁷ White, *Women's Magazines*, 100.

²⁸ Head, *It Could Never Have Happened*, 249-50.

²⁹ See Walter A. Friedman, *Birth of a Salesman: the Transformation of Selling in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), for a detailed account of the development of U.S. consumerism.

the Harmsworth-style publications acted not simply to define a lifestyle that could be used to attract an advertising clientele of their own; it also simultaneously inculcated attitudes that were less favorable to their consumerist-oriented American rivals, who had recently taken up residence in the West End of London.