THE CHANGING IMAGE OF WOMEN IN CANADIAN MASS CIRCULATING MAGAZINES, 1930-1970

by Susannah J. Wilson

Traditionally, two views of the relationship between mass media content and society have been expressed by sociologists. The first is that media content reflects the norms and values of society; the second is that the media act as an agent of socialization or social control. Using this first perspective, there has been a long-standing precedent in the humanities and social sciences of using fictional materials as social documents. Legends, folktales and myths have been used as indicators of the values and concerns of

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various societies. An example of this approach in sociology is found in the work of Lantz and his associates. (Lantz, 1975) They were interested in whether or not certain characteristics of present-day family structure (generally attributed to the effects of industrialization) were present in the pre-industrial family. Their study covered the period 1741-1850 and used magazines as a source of data. Other sociologists (for example, Irene Taviss, 1969) have used the media to test theories of social change. The underlying assumption of these studies is that "magazine content, at least in a general way, is a reflection of the real world." (Lantz, 1975: 23) The value of magazine-content as a social document rests on this assumption: that the accounts are rooted in a determinable way to the culture and social structure being studied. If this connection could be demonstrated, mass magazine-content may prove to be an important tool for the social historian and the sociologist.

To this end, however, there has been little concern with carrying out longitudinal studies. Conceivably, the media present images which could be consistent misrepresentations over time or images which change at rates which do not correspond to rates of change in society. Without the evidence of longitudinal data, these discrepancies may be interpreted as being simply a lack of reflection of social change when in fact they provide evidence of social control.

If one turns to the latter view of the relationship between society and mass media content, Wright has provided a good rationale for studying the media as an agent of socialization or social control.

> Content analyses have sometimes been undertaken because of the researcher's concern with the social problem of discrimination and prejudice against minority peoples along racial, ethnic, religious and other lines. Symbolic under-representation, misrepresentation, stereotyping and other forms of distorted portrayals of minority individuals may, it is argued, contribute to prejudicial and discriminatory treatments of individuals in real life. In addition, these symbolic portraits may be the major sources of impressions and information that certain people have about others. . . . Media portrayals also provide potential role-models for the audience members, and the quantity and quality of minority-group portrayals may have important consequences for the mass media's impact on socialization, especially for the young. (Wright, 1975: 127)

As one of the agents of socialization, the mass media have been strongly criticized for contributing to the inculcation of stereotypes. One of the focuses of criticism has been media-presentations of women. This concern is reinforced by the prevalence of

stereotyped images found in all communication media directed at all age-groups.(1) Studies of children's television and children's books have consistently shown that females are underrepresented and are presented in roles which are "stereotyped and dull." As one study found, even female squirrels wear aprons. Textbooks, even at the university level, perpetuate this pattern. Kischener (1973) found that fifty percent of a sample of introductory sociology texts failed to index a reference to women.

The publication of Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique in 1963 marked the beginning of a series of studies of the media portrayal of women. According to Friedan, the 'Spirited New Woman' image of fictional heroines in magazines in the 1930's and 1940's changed to that of the 'Happy Housewife' in the 1950's. Despite the fact that female labour-force participation increased, magazine heroines were increasingly presented in the role of housewife-mother. Bailey (1969) found that this image continued to predominate in 1957 and 1967. During this decade the number of heroines who were career-women declined. Furthermore, career-women were rarely presented in a sympathetic light.

This pattern of stereotyped traditional behaviour has been found in studies investigating the image of women in advertising, television, the movies and literature.(2) This is not, moreover, a strictly North American phenomenon

MOTHER OF ELEVEN WAS ALL RUNDOWN

"Helped Wonderfully" by Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound

MRS. A. HARRISON
15 Hanley St., Toronto, Ontario

"I am the mother of eleven children including two sets of twins seventeen months apart. My oldest child is twelve. I was so rundown and thin that I could not work. Had pains in my back and head most of the time. Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound had heavy odds to work against but it helped me wonderfully. I have been taking it for four months now. I am feeling strong again, have no pain in my head or back, have gained ten pounds and can do all the work for my family."—Mrs. A. Harrison, 15 Hanley St., Toronto, Ontario.

"EASIER AT CHILDBIRTH"

"Before I took Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound I was always tired, had dizzy spells, also headaches and bearing down pains at my period. My stepfather told me to try it when he saw what a condition I was in. I have three fat, jolly children. I took the Vegetable Compound before and after they were born, and found it easier at childbirth."—Mrs. Percy Earl Snow, Pictou, Nova Scotia.

(although Oakley, 1972, found, in comparing Polish and American magazine fiction, that the Polish image of women was more liberal than the American). A cross-cultural study of North American and Latin American magazine fiction found passive behaviour was stressed in both. (Flora, 1971)

Studies which have focused on the image of women in the media generally assume that the media act as agents of socialization, that definitions of reality are created and sustained by media-presentations and internalized by audience members. Some support for this assumption has been provided by investigations of media effects. However, most of these have focused on the socialization of children by the mass

media; adult socialization has been neglected.

Despite the fact that the study of media-effects has received disproportionate emphasis in the field of mass communication, many questions remain unanswered. A UNESCO report (1970) on the mass media has pointed out one reason for the lack of empirical evidence in support of a causal relationship between media-content and effects. Much of the research has centred on direct effects of specific messages, many of which focus on high-involvement issues. It is also possible that gradual and cumulative change in attitudes or behaviour might result from repeated presentations of a point-of-view. Because of a dependence on stimulus-response models, these have not been measured in effects studies. It is the long-term and diffuse effects of media presentations which should be the concern of studies of the media's role in socialization. There has been some evidence from 'uses and gratifications'(3) research that the entertainment media serve as a source of normative behaviour patterns as well as of advice in coping with everyday problems. (Gerbner, 1958; Herzog, 1944; Rainwater, 1959) I would argue that studies of mass media effects, or of the uses of the media by members of the audience must be improved by more detailed knowledge of the content. Too few content-studies have examined the media image of women over a long period of time. Fewer still have systematically compared media images to changes in women's lives. It is when these two are discrepant that the greatest impact of the media as an agent of socialization may be felt.

What is the relationship between media-content and social change? Does media-content parallel changes in the lives of women or does the content continue to present traditional images despite these changes? If the media image of women does not change in response to social change but continues to present traditional images, the thesis that the media act as agents of traditional socialization would be strengthened. However, conclusive evidence for this position can only come from audience-studies which evaluate the extent to which media images are internalized.

Study Design:

This study was designed to clarify the relationship between the image of women in Canadian media and changes in the lives of Canadian women. One of the greatest areas of change in this century in Canada, and a change which has affected many women, has been increased female labour-force participation. Therefore, a comparison of the extent to which media images respond to this change will indicate whether the media merely reflect change or whether the media perpetuate traditional images. To determine this relationship, this

study focused on media heroines in Canadian mass circulating magazines. Most of the previous work in this area has concentrated on fictional heroines. On the other hand, popular biographies provide an indication of the attributes of real-life heroines considered worthy of emulation. Here, a comparison is made between the employment-status and type of occupation of heroines of both fiction and biography, respectively referred to as fictional and profile heroines.

Why don't you ask the man at the store?

The data was collected in a content-analysis of two Canadian magazines for the forty-year period beginning in 1930. Chatelaine and Maclean's are the only two general-interest Canadian magazines published throughout this period. Both were used in this study. A randomly-selected sample of four fiction and four profile articles was drawn from each magazine for each year of the period 1930 to 1969. In this sample there were a total of 294 fictional main female characters and 289 profile heroines.

Canadian Magazine Heroines:

Like their counterparts in other entertainment media, most fictional heroines were young and attractive. Most single heroines were involved in romantic entanglements and most married heroines were interested in stabilizing family relationships. Although some stories were secondarily concerned with social or economic issues, the primary concern of most stories was found to be romantic or family relationships. The settings were recognizable ones. Very few took place beyond familiar locations in Canada, the United States or Great Britain. Profile heroines were more often married than single and were generally older than heroines of fiction. Predictably they also more highly-educated and more often employed. Women selected for treatment in popular biographies were unique in one way or another, either in terms of their occupations, their talents, their experien-

ces or their relationships with well-known people. Profile heroines suggest to readers a broad range of possibilities of how women in various fields organize their lives. The range of statuses and roles attributed to fictional heroines was far more limited. Typically, they were members of the dominant social group, young and involved in traditional family relations.

Labour Force Participation of Magazine Heroines:

In this sample, thirty-five percent of the fictional and seventy percent of the profile heroines were gainfully employed. In 1931 twenty-three percent of Canadian Women were employed. By 1971 this figure had risen to thirty-seven percent. (Statistics Canada, Women in the Labour Force, 1973: 227)

Table 1

Employment Rates of Magazine Heroines and Canadian Women* by Decade 1930 - 1969

Percent Employed

	1930's		1940's		1950's		1960's		All Years	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Fictional Heroines	30	(87)	35	(75)	33	(70)	52	(42)	35	(294)
Profile Heroines	60	(43)	84	(71)	70	(80)	62	(79)	70	(233)
Canadian Women	24		26		25		32		27	

Source of Canadian Data: Statistics Canada, Women in the Labour Force, 1973: 227

*These figures represent the mean participation-rate for each decade calculated from annual figures.

The data for fictional heroines show a similar pattern of increased labour-force participation from thirty percent in the 1930's to fifty-two percent in the decade of the sixties. However, as Table 1 shows, more fictional heroines were employed than were Canadian women when data are compared for each of four decades. Following World War II, the drop in labour-force participation rates of Canadian women is shown in a decline in the employment figures of fictional heroines in the 1950's. The employment rates of profile heroines greatly exceeds the rates for the Canadian population for each decade. Highest rates for profile heroines were found in the 1940's when many biographies were of women making an active contribution to the war effort. After 1950 the number of "personal interest" biographies increased and employment rates declined in correspondence with this change in focus.

In Canada, increases in the size of the female labour force have been largely due to increased activity of married women. Between 1931 and 1971 the percentage of the female labour force who were married increased from ten to fifty-seven. The percentage who were single declined from eighty-one to thirty-four. The figures for separated, divorced or widowed women have remained stable. (Armstrong and Armstrong, 1975: 379) In the magazine world, corresponding figures do not reflect Canadian trends. Table 2 shows the distribution by marital status of employed heroines. One of the striking features of the data in this table is the small number of employed married women in magazine fiction. Only thirteen percent of these employed heroines were married; seventy-four percent were single. For profile heroines, on the other hand, equal numbers of employed women were married and single. (See Table 2.) There was little fluctuation in the figures for profile heroines over time. On the other hand, by far the greatest proportion of employed married heroines of fiction were found in 1940's stories (in 1960, only four percent of employed heroines were married). The fictional data clearly contradicts the trend towards increased labour-force participation of married women.

Career-maintenance was seldom integral to the plots of magazine fiction, although there were a few stories which introduced the theme of balancing career and marriage. Two of these appeared in 1939 issues of the magazines. The heroine of "Nobody Has Everything" (Chatelaine, October, 1939) was a successful department store executive. She was childless after six years of marriage and earned more money than her husband. Because of this, she found that she was losing her husband to another younger woman. She decided to relinquish her career and so she won back her husband's affection. The same problem was faced by Marcia in "The Woman's Place." (Maclean's, June 1, 1939) Marcia was

thirty-four, childless, had been married for ten years and was supporting her husband who was unemployed. Their marriage was unhappy and she considered leaving him. Just in time, she found that she had been demoted in her job and made the decision to accompany him to a job-possibility in British Columbia. The second heroine of this story, Doris, was offered Marcia's job and was therefore financially able to marry. She realized the delicacy of the situation as her new salary was greater than her fiancé's and she knew she would have to be extremely tactful to pursue her career without damaging his self-concept. The message of these stories is interesting if somewhat contradic-

Table 2

Marital Status of
Employed Heroines of Fiction
and Profile by Decade 1930 - 1969

	1930-39	1940-49	1950-59	1960-69	All Years
% Single					
Fiction	77	65	76	77	74 (70)
Profile	48	58	50	40	49 (77)
% Married					
Fiction	8	23	14	4	13 (12)
Profile	52	42	48	49	47 (72)
% 'Other'					
Fiction	15	12	10	19	13 (13)
Profile	0	0	2	11	4 (6)
Total Employed:					
Fiction %	100	100	100	100	100
N	(26)	(26)	(21)	(22)	(95)
Profile %	100	100	100	100	100
N	(21)	(41)	(50)	(45)	(157)

tory. For a married woman to work is one thing; to be more successful than her husband is quite another. Such a situation not only requires infinite understanding on the part of woman but also could in fact mean that she would be put in a position to give up her career to save her marriage.

The single most important factor affecting the labour-force participation of married women in Canada is the presence or absence of young children. (Allingham, 1968) Children did not appear to affect the employment of profile heroines but strongly determined whether or not fictional heroines worked. Married profile heroines with children were as apt to be employed as those without children. Only four fictional heroines with children worked; two during the war. "The Wrong Kind of Woman" (Chatelaine, May, 1956) demonstrated how disruptive a married woman's employment might be to her family. The heroine, who had been a dancer before her marriage, decided to go back to work--not for her own sake or financial reasons--but because she thought her husband expected it. Her husband reacted negatively to this decision and her son ran away from home in rebellion. It is unnecessary to add that she gave up the idea immediately. Again the reader is faced with conflicting messages from fiction and profiles. The fact that so few married women with children were described as employed could be interpreted as an attempt to reinforce traditional values and behaviour patterns.

Type of Occupation:

Fictional magazine heroines were not employed in the Blue Collar, Primary, Transportation or Service sectors of the economy, although approximately one-half of the female labour-force are. Again this could be interpreted as disapproval but more possibly authors choose to write about women in more 'glamorous' occupations. Even during the war when soap advertisers photographed trousered women operating large machines, women in fiction were still involved in traditionally-feminine occupations. Of the total of 122 fictional heroines for whom an occupation was indicated (some of whom were not at that point actively employed) one-third were Professionals and Managers and one-quarter were clerical workers. The remainder were in Creative or Artistic fields (18%), Skilled Service (12%) or Semi-skilled occupations (12%). It is clear from this list that few heroines are in low-status jobs and that the occupational distribution of heroines in magazine fiction bears slight resemblance to the types of jobs in which most Canadian women find employment. Clerical jobs were equitably represented but Professionals and Managers were over-represented and unglamorous jobs virtually ignored. Profile heroines were employed in a wide range of occupations, most of which were high-status, important, stimulating and often highly rewarded.

Occupations of profile heroines remained relatively stable over the 40-year

period. The most popular group were entertainers. Both magazines (although particularly Chatelaine) showed a strong interest in members of the Royal Family as subjects of biographies. The following were featured at least twice: Queen Elizabeth (7); Princess Margaret (4); The Queen Mother (5); Queen Mary (3); The Duchess of Kent (2); and Princess Anne (2). There also was a strong interest in those close to well-known personalities such as The Royal Nanny, Nehru's niece and the Quints' nurse. On another level were wives of celebrities (Mrs. Johnny Bower and Mrs. Athol Layton) and those women with unique personal experiences: "I Married a Jew," "I Married an Ex-Convict," "I Was a Doukhobor" or "I'm Married, Happy and Went Through Hell for a Legal Abortion." In the 1960's there was an increase in the number of "personal experience" articles and a slight decline in the number of articles about Royalty.

The relative political radicalism of the 1930's was reflected in heroines' occupations. One-fifth of the heroines during this period were either politicians or married to politicians. During the war the choice of heroine reflected both a concern for problems of the war and a recognition of the active participation of women. (Interestingly, the Commandant of the Women's Army Corps who was profiled by both magazines was introduced as Lt.-Col. Joan Kennedy in Maclean's and as Mrs. Norman Kennedy in Chatelaine).

In the 1960's, biographies of Betty Friedan and Anne Francis indicate that although interest in the Women's Movement was not great, it was not entirely absent either.

A media-emphasis on high-status occupations could serve to inspire women readers by demonstrating that it is possible for women to break through the pattern of traditionally-held expectations. Other media studies have found a similar over-representation of high-status occupational groups attributed to both male and female media characters. On the other hand, such emphasis could have the negative effect of suggesting a disapproval of the lower-status jobs in which most employed women find themselves and at the same time creating a false impression of the extent of mobility of women into high-status jobs.

> In the past few years, the mass media have focused a good deal of attention on the steady movement of women into the glamorous and fulfilling world of professional and technical work. The publicity is scarcely justified by their numbers. Certainly there are more women doctors, lawyers and university teachers in 1971 than ever before in Canada. . . but this is beside the point. Professional and technical women still accounted for only a very small proportion of the female labour force, especially if the two-thirds of

them in elementary and secondary teaching and in nursing are excluded. . . .

(Armstrong and Armstrong, 1975: 376)

Conclusion:

The messages transmitted by fiction and profiles in Canadian mass magazines were often conflicting. Profiles were generally about women who were successful occupationally and whose success was not hampered by ethnic background, education or by decisions to marry or have children. On the other hand, the remuneration and prerequisites accompanying high-status jobs mean that role-conflicts are more easily managed. The life-style accompanying the job of an actress, a politician or a member of the royal family is remote from the life-experiences of most Canadian women. Fictional heroines were more likely to confront problems of day-to-day living experienced by their readers but again these messages were not unidimensional. Although most married heroines were housewives, some managed (with difficulty) juggling career and marriage. Role-conflicts, however, were easily resolved in the world of magazine fiction. If a choice was required, heroines inevitably gave precedence to the role of housewife-mother.

Employment rates for magazine heroines were found to exceed those of Canadian women over the forty-year period from 1930-1969. Profile heroines were most often gainfully employed. A closer examination of the employed heroines shows, however, that magazine fiction does not reflect the most important change in the Canadian female labour force. Very few married fictional heroines were portrayed as being employed and almost never if they had children.

It is in terms of these contradictions that the media's role as an agent of adult socialization will presumably have the greatest impact. Knowledge of discrepancies such as these is a necessary prerequisite to investigating in audience studies the extent to which media images are internalized and ways in which conflicting impressions are resolved.

NOTES

1. A recent review of studies of female images in the mass media is found in Linda J. Busky, "Sex-Role Research on the Mass Media," Journal of Communication, Vol. 24, No. 4 (August, 1975), pp. 107-131.

2. Examples of these studies are found in the attached bibliography. Additional references may be found in the article cited above.

3. For a discussion of this orientation see E. Katz, J. Blumer and M. Gurevitch, "Uses and Gratifications Research," Public Opinion Quarterly, 37 (Winter, 1973), pp. 509-23.

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