

What's Happening Over at Cosmo?

WESLEY COHEN



WRITER'S COMMENT: Cosmopolitan magazine did not enter my childhood home. Such fluffy, hypersexual, antifeminist content was contraband. At home, we read Mental Floss or Sunset or maybe Vogue. Even after my parents lifted their unspoken ban, Cosmo was only read in waiting rooms or perhaps as a special treat on vacation. Now that I'm a grownup with a computer, I read Cosmo's website whenever I want, with a mixture of guilt and secret pleasure. But one day, after checking my horoscope, I read a story that labeled the 2015 Charleston Church massacre an act of domestic terrorism when mainstream news outlets were still throwing up their hands in confusion. I was shocked to see a brand known for frivolity discuss the brutal history of racial violence against Southern Black churches. When David Masiel told my UWP 104C journalism class to write a feature on whatever we wanted, I finally found an outlet for my Cosmo curiosity.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: From the outset of our quarter working together, Wesley Cohen showed remarkable tenacity as a student and writer of journalism. Her hand always seemed to be outstretched, her eyes sparkling with interest. She focused on whatever lay before her, from obscure points of grammar and usage to detailed concerns about structure and methodology. If she wasn't answering a question herself, she was questioning the answers of others. In a brief ten weeks she practiced and excelled at every genre put before her, never settling for the obvious stories. When she first floated the idea of looking into a shift in editorial policy at Cosmopolitan magazine, she didn't know where it would take her, only that her interest in the subject led to

questions, and with that the very journalistic desire for answers. Working in the mode of news analysis, she reaches beyond questions of editorial choice toward a deeper concern over social values, showing in “What’s Happening Over at Cosmo?” both the mind of a scientist and the instincts of a storyteller.

– David Masiel, *University Writing Program*

Open up *Cosmopolitan Magazine’s* March 2016 issue and you’ll find tips for flirting with a guy at work (“Text him a funny follow-up!”) and a fashion-infused profile of actress-slash-beauty mogul Jessica Alba (titled “Billion Dollar Babe.”)

Between these pieces is an eight-page feature on the intersection of gun rights and domestic violence in America. The article includes an eye-catching graphic of a chocolate gun in a candy box surrounded by brightly striped truffles, and a handy flowchart for talking with a new romantic partner about gun ownership. There are also stark warnings and statistics.

According to the piece’s author Liz Welch, “8,7000 women were shot to death by their partners between 2000 and 2013,” and women are 500 percent more likely to be killed when a physically abusive relationship involves a gun. The article frames gun control as a women’s issue, chronicling the stories of several young women who were murdered by abusive partners or ex-partners.

It’s rare to find a magazine that covers domestic violence and celebrity fashion on equal footing – this wide editorial scope is largely the work of current editor-in-chief Joanna Coles. *Cosmo’s* shift towards more diverse content goes against decades of editorial tradition in a brand famous for its focus on sex, celebrities, and fashion.

Cosmo started life in 1886 as a women’s magazine focused on family life, fashion, and homemaking, before transforming into a fiction magazine that published Willa Cather, Upton Sinclair, and Kurt Vonnegut. Chief editor Helen Gurley Brown was brought on in the 60’s in response to weak sales, and she recreated the magazine as a sex-centered, single woman’s guidebook to the fab life.

Brown pledged to keep *Cosmo* “frisky and fresh” over her three-decade reign. She acknowledged in her November 1995 letter from the editor that women may be interested in subjects other than “sexual

pleasure, passion, friendship, love, achievement,” but told readers that “we let the newspapers, TV shows, and newsmagazines deal with them.” But current *Cosmo* editor-in-chief Joanna Coles eschews this either-or approach to writing for women, telling *NPR*'s Rachel Martin, “I have no problem understanding that women are interested in mascara and the Middle East.”

Since 2014, *Cosmo* has endorsed political candidates based on whether they support abortion rights, equal pay, and birth control access. Coles doesn't see a conflict in presenting pro-choice political endorsements alongside stiletto recommendations: “I feel that these are about lifestyle issues for women. The biggest single decision which will impact your life is when you have a child. I want women to have control over that, not a bunch of old white guys sitting in D.C.”

Coles's new *Cosmo* is all about diversifying what counts as “women's interest.” A new header on *Cosmopolitan.com*, next to “LOVE,” “CELEBS,” and “BEAUTY” reads – in appropriate millennial format – “#COSMOVOTES.” Under this tab, readers can find *Cosmo*'s political endorsements, updates on polls and primaries, and opinion pieces on candidates and issues. It makes no secret of *Cosmo*'s political leanings: An article called “6 Questions the Moderators at the Democratic Debate Should Ask About Abortion” is prominently featured. Among these questions: does the candidate have a plan for working with a “hostile Congress” to repeal the Hyde Amendment preventing use of Medicaid to cover abortion costs?

In her same 1995 letter from the editor, Brown laid out her reasoning for leaving hard-hitting subjects out of *Cosmo*'s pages, writing, “We're not big on **scaring** you.” But Jill Filipovic's November 2015 piece “The Anti-Abortion Extremists Are No Longer on the Margins” seems pretty scary to me, linking anti-abortion violence directly to aggressive rhetoric by Republican politicians such as Ben Carson and Mike Huckabee.

Filipovic, a UN Foundation Fellow and award-winning contributor to *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Al Jazeera America*, and *TIME Magazine*, is no lightweight. But in the margin by Filipovic's byline, there's a picture of Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen as toddlers above a link offering to show me “A Photo From Every Year of Their Lives.”

This new *Cosmo* balances pithy quizzes about Hannah Montana and critiques of the hypersexualization of African-American women in society. How does one women's magazine make it all work?

First of all, *Cosmo's* new direction rejects the idea of women's interest journalism as a niche market. On *CNN's Reliable Sources*, Joanna Coles pushed back against host Brian Stelter's suggestion that working with women's magazines to reach voters – instead of reaching out directly through social media or relying on hard news reporting – was a way that political candidates use “alternative media.”

“Well, I don't think of women's magazines with 53 million readers as being ‘alternative media,’” says Coles, nearly breaking into a laugh. “I think it might be as big, if not bigger than the footprint of *Reliable Sources*, Brian.”

Coles notes instead that she believes her “very large” readership has been underserved by mainstream media. It's hard to argue with her. While men's interest magazines like *Esquire* publish hard-hitting cultural essays alongside fiction by the likes of George Saunders and Stephen King, the news that *Cosmo* had won a National Magazine Award for an extensive piece on contraception was met with astonishment. Coles seems to carry her sense of humor in her purse, however. About a story titled “It's Time to Start Taking ‘Cosmopolitan’ Seriously,” she tweeted “Start:?????”

A different *Reliable Sources* interview featured host Brian Stelter asking two uncomfortable-looking female journalists “Are women's magazines serious?” Roberta Meyers, editor-in-chief at *Elle*, was set up against *Rolling Stone* writer Janet Reitman, who worried aloud that female writers who focus on women's interest writing often never “break out” of women-only journalism. Meyers noted that she started out at *Rolling Stone* before taking the lead at *Elle* and pointed out that many of her writers are also published in *The New Yorker*, *New York Magazine*, and *Rolling Stone*. Reitman responded by saying that she appreciates and reads women's magazines herself, but reiterates her earlier concern about the “ghettoizing” of female-interest journalists. This time, Reitman says, eyes focused and concerned, that many women journalists “just literally cannot, somehow, make it to write for larger men's magazines or general-interest magazines...”

It seems that this, in Reitman's mind, is the ladder that female journalists must climb: women's magazines, men's magazines, then general-interest magazines. Or perhaps: women's magazines, men's magazines/general-interest magazines. Because in many ways, male interests are considered general interest.

While writing about romance or fashion puts a journalist into the “ghetto” of trivial feminine pursuits, typically masculine interests make for respectable reading material. As Joanna Coles notes in her *NPR* interview, “Men are allowed to talk about sports relentlessly, and yet we still take them seriously. I don’t understand why women can’t talk about fashion, or sex, or love, or wanting more money and not be taken as seriously as men.”

In her *Reliable Sources* appearance, *Elle*’s Roberta Meyers looked fabulous: her blow-out great, her makeup subtle and professional, her poise unshakeable. But she looked worn down, too. She spoke of a perceived gap between her readers and the rest of the world, “the idea that there’s a divide between people who care about fashion, and only care about fashion,” and everybody else. She goes on to say “I find it sad...that we’re still talking about women as a whole separate kind of people, you know?” Meyers spoke brightly of her love for her readers, but to Reitman and Stelter, choosing to write for *Elle* instead of *Rolling Stone* is akin to buying a house in the ghetto.

It’s hard to find an article discussing *Cosmo*’s long history without reading contemptuous descriptions of its past content. On a Reddit AMA, *Cosmopolitan.com*’s current sex editor described *Cosmo*’s past advice as “creepy servile blowjob magic.” *Jezebel*’s managing editor Kate Dries describes *Cosmo*’s new focus on career advancement and female empowerment as a “slow climb out of lipstick-and-lasagna land.”

Cosmo was forbidden to my sisters and me when we were growing up. My parents didn’t want us learning this male-centric sexuality or building a certain image of female beauty. They even tried to ban Barbie from the premises before she snuck in inside wrapped birthday presents and well-meant hand-me-downs. I don’t blame them.

Cosmo passes down narrow ideas of what a woman is and does and wants. Women of color, transgender women, and queer women are not addressed as *Cosmo*’s central audience, and the women who star on its covers month to month are overwhelmingly thin and pale and provocatively dressed. My parents didn’t want to limit the type of woman I could be while I was still a girl.

So instead I learned how to be like a boy. I learned how to play hockey and laughed at the sort of girls who wanted to be princesses. I learned not to cry when I got hurt, and I learned to love reading about boys, or girls who pretended to be boys, in *Eragon* and *To Kill a*

Mockingbird and *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man*. And in many ways this was an honest expression of who I was and who I wanted to be.

But perhaps these behaviors also came from an understanding that it was possible – easy, even – to be too feminine. That uber-femininity could be shallow, or stupid, or mean. That it could be dangerous.

I am learning to look hard at the books that I read and the movies that I watch and the people that I admire. I am learning not to dismiss femininity for its own sake, but this is hard when feminine books and speech patterns and movies are constantly dismissed by the cultural outlets I admire. The shock with which media outlets have responded to Joanna Coles's work at *Cosmo* is yet another example of this dismissal.

But still I have learned to love Taylor Swift and horoscopes and eyeshadow, as well as weight lifting and science fiction and neuroscience. Walt Whitman and Suzanne Collins. And *Cosmo* has helped.

I am not saying that *Cosmo* is above critique. It continues to sideline the experiences of women who do not fit its target audience. It builds prehistoric concepts of femininity into its columns, and tells women implicitly or explicitly to trim down, dress up, and make themselves beautiful. Its advertisements and photosets build a fantasy of femininity in which every woman is pale and thin and glossy. This does real damage.

But *Cosmo* is not beneath contempt. When we close the door to *Cosmo* for its perceived frivolity or irrelevance, we close the door to women's voices, their interests and concerns and desires. By assuming that women's journalism cannot be real journalism, Brian Stelter and others declare that women cannot know what journalism looks like, that we don't even know which stories are important and which are stupid. That we earn the right to tell our own stories only by making them unfeminine.

That femininity cannot be universal.

But femininity is universal. It always has been.

And universal experiences are feminine. As long as men are taught, like I was, that femininity is saccharine and silly and toxic, they are also taught to hate a part of themselves.

Nobody wins this fight.

Making room for femininity in feminism means recognizing that outlets like *Cosmo* can be progressive as well as problematic.

I want the right to criticise *Cosmo* when it writes harshly about female celebrities' bodies and the right to relish its fashion slideshows.

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I want to read about face gloss and I want to know about domestic terrorism. I want the right to be unfeminine without recourse, and the right to delight in my femininity. As a woman, and as a person, I should not have to choose just one story.

Do I contradict myself?

Well then I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes.)