

Combining Mass and Class: The Story of O, The Oprah Magazine

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Introduction

Talk about Oprah Winfrey's magazine started early, perhaps appropriate for a magazine featuring an award winning talk show host. As early as 26 August 1999 the *New York Times* began enticing future readers with announcements of the major players at a then-unnamed magazine flaunting the Oprah Winfrey brand. Media watchers from *Advertising Age* to *Mediaweek* heralded the coming of *O, The Oprah Magazine* in the months prior to the magazine hitting newsstands in May/June 2000 (Granatstein, 2000; Kerwin, 2000; Kuczynski, 2000, January 3 and April 3).

And when the debut issue finally arrived in mid-April 2000, newsstands struggled to keep the magazine in stock. Within weeks the magazine sold 1.6 million copies, a figure including a second press run (O'Leary, 2001; Gonser, 2001). Within six months *O, The Oprah Magazine* was a monthly in a rapid upgrade from the original bi-monthly launch planned by partner Hearst Magazines (Gonser, 2001; Kuczynski, 2000, January 3). In the same time period *O, The Oprah Magazine* outsold proven titles *In Style*, *Self*, *Glamour* and *Vogue* as well as sister Hearst magazines *Good Housekeeping*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Victoria* (O'Leary, 2001) and weathered its first lawsuit (Liptak, 2001). And magazine publisher Gruner and Jahr USA, looking to cash in on *O, The Oprah Magazine's* success, gave *McCall's* readers *Rosie*. Gruner and Jahr pinned hopes to the appeal of daytime talk show host/actress Rosie O'Donnell to sell magazines in the same way talk show host/actress Oprah Winfrey did.

Could Gruner and Jahr be faulted for imitation? The formula at *O, The Oprah Magazine* appeared to be a winner. The formula combined essential elements of two established and proven magazine genres -- the celebrity magazine of Hollywood in its heyday (Honey, 1972) and the women's service magazine, a viable commodity since *Ladies' Home Journal* arrived in the late 1800s (Damon-Moore, 1994). As a celebrity publication *O, The Oprah Magazine* centered upon talk show host Oprah Winfrey, perhaps the most recognized celebrity of the late twentieth century. And she populated her new publication with her equally celebrated friends from Katie Couric to Camille Cosby, Jay Leno to Venus and Serena Williams, Maya Angelou to Nelson Mandela, Rudy Giuliani to Bette Midler, Elie Weisel to Martha Stewart and Jane Fonda. Moreover, *O, The Oprah Magazine* served readers in the tradition of women's service magazines with helpful information on topics ranging from organizing a pile of vacation snapshots and the importance of well-shaped eyebrows to dealing with breast cancer and the loss of a spouse.

Termed a "personal-growth guide for the next century" (Kuczynski, 2000, p. C11), one of a crop of "women's lifestyle magazines in the holistic genre" (Granatstein, 2001, October 22, p. 38), and "a workbook wherein you can apply what you learn" (Shulevitz, 2000, p. 76) among other descriptions, *O, The Oprah Magazine* blossomed in a harsh magazine climate. Established titles such as *Industry Standard*, *Brill's Content*, *Mademoiselle* and *Working*

Women shuttered their doors about the same time *O, The Oprah Magazine* first appeared (Poniewozik, 2002). An online column from Wooden Horse Publishing predicted *O, The Oprah Magazine* would match *Playboy* magazine in copies sold per issue, a figure calculated in August 2001 at 3.2 million. Magazines *Rosie* and *Talk* also built on the cache of celebrity but faltered and faded before *O, The Oprah Magazine* celebrated its third anniversary. In other words, *O, The Oprah Magazine* did something right.

This qualitative study of *O, The Oprah Magazine* located three elements the author found key to the success of the publication in the magazine's first three years of publication. The author designated these elements as service, celebrity and boutique. In this study, content of the magazine is reviewed with regard to the listed elements. Reader letters also are examined to gauge audience reaction to the magazine. This study attempts to assess what was presented in the first three years of *O, The Oprah Magazine*, what readers thought of that content and how that content reflected the hybrid nature of *O, The Oprah Magazine* as fusion of the women's service and celebrity magazine genres.

The author asserts that *O, The Oprah Magazine* combined the elements of service, celebrity and boutique in a highly successful way. The formula itself is not unique. Examples of the formula fill book racks, newsstands, library shelves, and mailboxes every month. However, advertising revenues, industry awards and buzz, and reader interest indicated that *O, The Oprah Magazine*, employed the formula more effectively than most.

Literature Review

In its first three years *O, the Oprah Magazine* was a hybrid, publication accessorized with several special touches that set the magazine apart. In this hybrid elements of the women's service and celebrity magazines were altered just enough to get noticed as novel without running the risk of alienating its target audience -- women accustomed to reading women's magazines. To borrow from science, *O, The Oprah Magazine* successfully joined the DNA of the woman's service magazine with the Hollywood or celebrity magazine of the mid-20th century. *O, The Oprah Magazine* was not a clone, however. The magazine displayed selected ingredients that distinguished it from textbook examples of the women's service or celebrity magazine.

O, The Oprah Magazine took as its starting point the tradition of the women's service magazine. This magazine genre was rooted in the 19th century. The timeline of notable women's magazines in the United States frequently starts with *Godey's Lady's Book* a publication of antebellum sensibilities at its peak in the 1860s (Zuckerman, 1998). *O, The Oprah Magazine*, however, drew the bulk of its genetic material from the women's service magazines, the pillars of publication that scholars McCracken (1993), Damon-Moore (1994), Deeken (2002), and others distinguished as the Seven Sisters. This esteemed group included *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *McCall's*, *Woman's Home Companion*, *Delineator*, and *Pictorial Review*. Different in focus than fashion magazines that rarely strayed from the display of the latest clothing styles, the women's service magazine sought to teach readers to cook, clean, and meet the challenges of everyday life. The women's service magazine dispensed valuable life lessons to help readers and their families live at their best. In her study of women's magazines during the Cold War, Walker (2000) noted women service magazines "sought to address nearly every aspect of women's lives" (p. 53). Moreover, such concerns were addressed within the covers of the compact and easily accessible format of the magazine (Damon-Moore 1994). Readers of *Good Housekeeping* expected to find articles on cooking, along with household tips and fashion news (Zuckerman, 1998). Readers of *McCall's* and *Delineator* found similar content plus clothing patterns from the companies that owned the publications. The owners of the magazines were pattern makers *McCall's* and *Butterick*, respectively (Zuckerman, 1998). And readers of *Ladies' Home Journal* pored over house plans that they were encouraged to share with their contractor (Walker, 2000). Women's lives were thoroughly examined and explicated in women's service magazines. The dedication to service continued as women and their environment changed. For example, *Cosmopolitan* magazine was redesigned in the 1960s to meet the needs of the young single woman moving through a newly sexual society (Zuckerman, 1998). *Redbook* retooled to become more relevant to readers in the late twentieth century. Early in the twenty-first century *McCall's* attempted to update its mission by morphing into the new

magazine *Rosie* in an effort to become current in a world where the stay-at-home mom was displaced by the “superwoman” with a career, family and active social life. Interestingly, *Rosie* was sent to *McCall’s* subscribers without solicitation. The magazine literally and figuratively replaced the former member of the Seven Sisters sorority in mailboxes (Carr, 2002).

Notably the advent of women’s magazines, particularly the women’s service title *Ladies’ Home Journal*, set the model for mass circulation media (Damon-Moore 1994; Folkerts & Teeter, 1994). Damon-Moore (1994) distinguished *Ladies’ Home Journal* as among the first advertising driven publications and among the most successful national advertising vehicles in history. *O, The Oprah Magazine* continued this impressive national advertising tradition right away, displaying 166 pages of advertisements in its 318-page debut issue (Shulevitz, 2000). In its first six issues, the magazine featured 905 ad pages (O’Leary, 2001). Women’s services magazines set out to educate women about what to buy through use of enticing advertisements and fostered a gendered consumer in the process (Damon-Moore, 1994). Complimentary copy also helped women learn which name brand products to buy and how to use them (Steinem, 1990). Advertisements featured in early issues of *O, the Oprah Magazine* helped readers choose perfume and beauty products through glossy advertisements from Aveda and Lancôme, among others, and advised on the best olive oil (Carapelli) and best financial services company (Prudential) to use. In the February 2003 issue, a feature story paid homage to the importance of shapely eyebrows and offered readers how-to advice, a list of products, tips from experts, a gallery of before and after mug shots of magazine staffers who underwent eyebrow pruning, and a time line of eyebrow fashion from ancient Egypt to the present (174-179). The necessity of proper attention to eyebrows was made very clear to the reader as a woman and as a consumer.

Readers of early issues of *O, The Oprah Magazine* also found the celebrity magazine in the structure of the magazine. Born in the heyday of Hollywood and resuscitated most recently in such publications as *In Style*, the celebrity magazine initially gave readers glimpses into the lives of the movie stars and later into the lives of political figures and television personalities (Honey, 1972). Such people made perfect magazine fodder because they “represent the incarnation of the American dream, which promised to all untold luxury and wealth” (Honey, 1972, p. 70). That which fascinated readers was less about the presentation of the American dream and more about getting the scoop on celebrities, including information on their lives at home, their relationships with family, friends and fans, and, especially their failures. Articles frequently featured celebrities who led seemingly charmed lives but were “unhappy, bored and dissatisfied” (Honey, p. 61). Such articles implied that the reader was capable of teaching the movie star or politician’s wife a thing or two about finding fulfillment at the home. Publications such as *Photoplay*, *Screen*, *Motion Picture*, and *Movie Mirror* along with celebrity features in photography driven magazines such as *Life* and *Look*, made famous people intimate friends. In the twenty-first century, the celebrity magazine lived on in a variety of publications. For example, *In Style* was filled with celebrity style, makeup, shopping and home decorating stories, advice, and tips. *TV Guide*, a pop culture icon itself, featured celebrity news and cover art to rival the likes of the movie magazines of Hollywood’s heyday. The diminutive magazine cashed in on the lure of celebrity by issuing the same edition of the magazine between different celebrity-spangled covers. For example, *TV Guide* released a collectible covers to coincide with the series finale of *The X-Files* in May 2002. Television series *Sex and the City* got a similar send-up when the end of the series was announced in June 2003. *TV Guide* published a pair of covers when cable television channel Music Television named pop star Janet Jackson the first MTV Icon in March 2001. Meanwhile Condé Nast’s *Vanity Fair* set high the cover celebrity saturation point with issues such as the April 2003 issue displaying a group photograph of Hollywood leading men Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, Harrison Ford, Tom Hanks, and Jack Nicholson and a star-studded cover on the annual music issue.

In *O, The Oprah Magazine*, celebrity came in a variety of forms. In each issue readers got a detailed multi-page celebrity interview, lists and accompanying essays by media figures about their favorite books, and discussions of epiphanies about life-altering events in the celebrity’s life. And there was Oprah Winfrey herself and all of the celebrity power she brought to her namesake publication. She appeared on the cover of every issue within the time span reviewed for this study. Inside the magazine, she ranked her favorite things in the monthly “O List” and was often the subject of feature stories

on topics from her weight loss battles to the extravagant parties she threw for her celebrated friends.

Arguably, *O, the Oprah Magazine* also benefited from a general rise in the importance of television and movie personalities as magazine content at the turn of the twentieth century. Interest in, or perhaps tolerance for, one-dimensional supermodels as cover subjects faded in the mid-nineties. Actors and other media personalities offered better value for the magazine cover buck, so to speak. For example, the bonus of a story about the celebrity pictured on the cover often pushed newsstand sales. Moreover, movie and television celebrities often charged less, behaved better, and were eager for the publicity that came with appearing on a magazine cover (Kuczynski, 1999).

Oprah Winfrey was part of the celebrity-centered switch. She boasted a track record as a celebrity cover subject who sold magazines prior to getting her own magazine. For example, her cover appearance on *In Style* in November 1998 marked the best-selling issue of the magazine to that point. Her appearances on *Vogue* in October 1998 and *Good Housekeeping* in December 1998 resulted in top selling issues of that year for those magazines (Kuczynski, 2000, January 3). In sum, the aura of celebrity in general, and Oprah Winfrey in particular, attracted readers.

However, celebrity mystique did not guarantee success for some of the peer publications of *O, The Oprah Magazine*. *Rosie*, the magazine built around daytime talk show host, actress and former stand-up comic Rosie O'Donnell, faltered and failed after the nature of O'Donnell's celebrity changed from "Queen of Nice" to outspoken activist (Tauber, 2002; Carr, 2002). *Talk*, a magazine founded on the power of celebrity of its well-known editor and the personalities it covered, also fell from grace. The magazine folded in three years despite backing from film and celebrity mill Miramax (Fabrikant & Kuczynski, 2001; Grossberger, 2002; Kuczynski & Fabrikant, 2002). Ultimately, *O, The Oprah Magazine* was a hybrid more along the lines of *Men's Health*, a niche magazine that updated its image by stirring in the spirit of women's fashion magazines such as a focus on appearance and tips about attracting and keeping the attention of the opposite sex to capture readers. In the process *Men's Health* prompted other men's magazines to do the same, including established titles *Esquire* and *GQ* (Featherstone, 1998). *Talk* wedded itself to the importance of celebrity as an overall concept. *O, The Oprah Magazine* invested in the importance of Oprah Winfrey.

Oprah, Queen of All Media

In October 1998 *Time* magazine stated what fans and media watchers knew when the newsweekly's cover story crowned talk show host Oprah Winfrey "Queen of All Media" (Farley, 1998, p. 82). Her long-running talk show aired nationwide and was broadcast. Her influence through her on-air book club was legendary. She acted in big budget Hollywood movies *The Color Purple* (1985), and *Beloved* (1998) and produced television movies *Tuesdays with Morrie* (1999) and *The Wedding* (1998). She was a magazine cover girl who appeared on *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping*. She expanded into cable television through the women's centered cable network Oxygen Media and entered cyberspace with Oprah.com (Sellers, 2002; "Oprah's going glossy," 1999). Her cookbooks and weight loss manuals dotted bookstore shelves. And undergraduate students analyzed her business acumen and her place in popular culture ("Business course," 2001).

Occasionally her Midas touch faltered, however. Beef producers, photographers, and at least one other magazine publisher sued her (Ledbetter, 1998; "Oprah Winfrey lawsuit," 2000; Liptak, 2001). *Beloved* was a box office disappointment. Author Jonathan Franzen confessed ambivalence to selection as one of her book club favorites and was un-invited from appearing on Winfrey's talk show (Giles, 2001; Kirkpatrick, 2001). However, such blows apparently left Winfrey unscathed. She remained "one of the most influential voices in pop culture" ("Oprah's going glossy," 1999).

When Oprah Winfrey decided to go into the magazine business, her royal title came in handy. First, she was a known property. Her years in the media

and her public persona carried an impressive clout. For example, the joint agreement between Hearst Magazines and Winfrey's Harpo, Inc. required Hearst to bankroll the magazine (Gonser, 2001). Also, by contract, Winfrey's appearance on the cover of her own magazine did not keep her from appearing on the covers of other magazines (Kuczynski, 2000, January 3). Oprah Winfrey also had ready-made material for her magazines in the content from her daily talk show. For example, featured interviews with celebrities occasionally served double duty on her talk show and in the magazine. Winfrey conducted a group interview with Nicole Kidman, Meryl Streep and Julianne Moore, stars of the Miramax release *The Hours* for the magazine (January 2003) and for her talk show. "Oprah" talk show regulars financial expert Suze Orman, Winfrey's personal trainer Bob Greene, and analyst Dr. Phil McGraw wrote columns for *O, The Oprah Magazine*. Interestingly *O, The Oprah Magazine* did more than attract the 33 million daily viewers Winfrey's talk show commanded. The magazine appealed to a more affluent reader. The typical reader was a professional woman in her 30s and 40s with disposable income (O'Leary, 2001).

In press before the magazine's launch, commentators speculated that a magazine featuring Oprah Winfrey was a guaranteed success. Lori O'Rourke, an advertising executive with Liz Claiborne, said of the magazine, "we really did not have any concerns because the magazine is about Oprah," (Granatstein, 2000, p. 75). Roberta Garfinkle, an advertising executive, said of the magazine, "My theory is that you could put out a magazine, call it Oprah, put her picture on the cover, and have blank pages inside and it would still sell," (Kuczynski, 2000, p. C11).

Winfrey's power as a media personality meant certain accommodations were required to keep her happy and in the magazine game. Concessions were made in the running of the magazine. Winfrey's longtime friend Gayle King presided over the New York offices of *O, The Oprah Magazine*. King's task was to make sure the magazine remained true to Winfrey's mission (Kuczynski, 2000, April 3). Winfrey herself kept tabs on the magazine through telephone and email. And there was the magazine itself. Cigarette and weight loss advertisements were banned from the debut issue in keeping with Winfrey's vision for the magazine as a reader-centered publication (Granatstein, 2000).

Perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of the magazine concerned the table of contents. The content list was moved to page two in an atypical concession in magazine publishing. Luxury cosmetic companies, fashion designers and other high-end advertisers long reigned over the opening pages of women's magazines and often loaded such pages with images of extravagance and excess. Winfrey rejected that idea. She felt that readers shouldn't have to search for information about what was in the magazine (Sellars, 2002). The table of contents in *O, The Oprah Magazine* moved to page two. Arguably, no one other than Oprah Winfrey had clout enough to demand and get such a change and break with established magazine industry tradition.

Making Money at *O, The Oprah Magazine*

In July 2000 *Advertising Age* outlined the odds of the successful launch of a new magazine. About half of new magazines folded within the first year (Fine, 2000). And launches were expensive, very expensive (Kim, 2001). For example, *Lucky* magazine budgeted \$8 to \$10 million just for an innovative advertising campaign to announce its debut in 2001 (Elliot, 2001). Cosmopolitan Group shelled out \$15 to \$20 million to put out its new title *CosmoGirl* in 2000 (Fine, 2000). Meanwhile, magazine industry watchers placed the price tag between \$50 and \$100 million to remake the monthly magazine *Us* into *Us Weekly* (Fine, 2000). *ReadyMade* magazine creator Shoshana Berger compared the risk of starting a magazine to that of an opening a restaurant (Lindsay & Gonser, 2001). Berger, who used money from friends and family and multiple credit cards to get her fledging magazine flying in 2001, was quoted, "It's naïve to think you can just launch a magazine today" (p. 15).

Hearst Magazines, a unit of media bastion Hearst Corporation, reportedly struck a complex fifty-fifty partnership deal with Oprah Winfrey's Harpo Inc. to bring *O, The Oprah Magazine* to newsstands and mailboxes (Fabrikant & Kuczynski, 2001; Fine, 2001). Both companies are privately held and

therefore exact figures are hard to come by. However, industry and news accounts offered glimpses into the arrangement. Hearst reportedly provided funding (Rose, 2000). Harpo provided Winfrey and her huge fan base of talk show viewers as future buyers. Winfrey's appearance as a magazine cover girl also sold magazines ranging from stalwart *Good Housekeeping* to hip *In Style*. However, the deal was not without risks for the conservative Hearst, a company described as "a dowdy, penny-pinching publisher of recipes for tuna casseroles" (Fabrikant & Kuczynski, 2001). For example, one of the risks rested in Harpo Inc.'s deal with Oxygen Media, which kept Hearst from a potentially lucrative link of *O, The Oprah Magazine* to its own internet and cable interests (Rose, 2000). Moreover, Winfrey lacked magazine publishing experience (Kuczynski, 2000, October 2). And at the time *O, The Oprah Magazine* arrived, Tina Brown's *Talk* magazine was draining Hearst coffers (Holt, 2003; Lowry, 2002). The chance of success and profit for a new magazine were slim.

Hearst, however, spent money to make money. The company adopted a common television strategy to mount "Oprah Upfront." Advertisers were given a two day window to make their best offers for space in the magazine. The strategy reportedly herded 600 pages of advertisements and \$20 million in commitments (Kerwin, 2000). In its first six issues the magazine had 905 pages of advertisements and close to \$51 million in revenues (Wilson, 2001). Most magazines strive for one thousand advertising pages in a year. The Oprah Winfrey fan base was being put to good use as well. After four issues *O, The Oprah Magazine* claimed more than a million subscribers (Kuczynski, 2000, October 2). Newsstand sales were brisk, too (Wilson, 2001). The year of its debut, *Advertising Age* named *O, The Oprah Magazine* both its Magazine of the Year and Launch of the Year (Fine, 2001).

In sum, in its debut year the magazine defied odds by *lasting* the year and *making* money. Critics and fans ranked the magazine as among movers and shakers in the industry (Kuczynski, 2000, October 2; Granatstein, 2001, January 1).

However, such a high level of achievement was not sustainable and performance slacked off for a time and fluctuated. Advertising pages in the May 2001 issues fell about five percent from the number of advertising pages in the May/June 2000 debut issue (Granatstein, 2001, April 23). Newsstands sales fell below a million for a time but rallied by 2003 (Fine, 2003; Madore, 2004). Subscriptions also tumbled. In 2002 subscriptions reportedly fell eleven percent from the 2.5 million of 2001 (Holt, 2003). However, the business relationship between Hearst and Harpo remained steady within the time period of this study. In April 2002 Hearst and Harpo Inc. launched a South African edition of *O, The Oprah Magazine* (Lowry, 2002).

Given the nature of Hearst and Harpo Inc. as privately held companies, details about the profits of *O, The Oprah Magazine* remain unknown and therefore predictions about the profitability of the magazine remain tricky. Based on the noted newsstand and subscription sales, profits should be strong, especially for the time period studied here. The million dollar advertisement revenues and the impressive number of advertisements in the magazine also imply profits. However, the cost of business can take a toll unseen by general audiences. For example, Elliot (2003) listed factors such as an uncertain economic climate and competition from television as impacting advertising in magazines. Events specific to Hearst and Harpo also may impact profits at *O, The Oprah Magazine*. For example, Winfrey's unpublished salary as founder and editorial director may impact overall cost for Hearst and Harpo. Moreover, *O, The Oprah Magazine* is one of many properties of Hearst Magazines and The Hearst Corporation and therefore profits for any one title or property may not be easily labeled. For example, within the time period studied here money made on *O, The Oprah Magazine* may have shored up the faltering *Talk* also owned by Hearst. However, from the outside, *O, The Oprah Magazine* is financially healthy and appeared to be equally healthy in its first three years.

O, The Oprah Magazine

In the days before *O, The Oprah Magazine*, arrived on newsstand shelves, critics groped to describe it. Some called the magazine a lifestyle

magazine, categorizing it with *Martha Stewart Living* and *RealSimple* (Granatstein, 2001). Others referred to the 9x10 and 3/4- inch book as “a personal growth guide” (Kuczynski, 2000, April 3). Others saw it as a workbook for the soul (Shulevitz, 2000). This qualitative review, encompassing thirty-four issues from May/June 2000 to April 2003, argues that in the first three years of publication, *O, The Oprah Magazine* was a hybrid of two known magazine genres, women’s service and celebrity. Moreover, the mixing of the genres, plus a handful of carefully calculated features, brought about the magazine’s success. Arguably in its first three years *O, The Oprah Magazine* was not brand new. Instead, *O, The Oprah Magazine* fused known elements into a viable magazine product. *O, The Oprah (Service) Magazine*

In her examination of the venerated women’s service magazine *Ladies’ Home Journal* (1994) scholar Helen Damon-Moore noted that the staying power of women’s service magazines rested in the ability of these publications to serve as both general interest and special interest magazines at the same time. Central themes, often expressed as departments, included housekeeping, relationships, cooking, and parenting to encompass all aspects of women’s lives.

In the thirty-four issues examined here *O, The Oprah Magazine*, similarly addressed the needs of its readers. In the mission statement for the magazine presented under the banner “Become More of Who You Are” Oprah Winfrey wrote to her readers, “My hope is that this magazine will help you lead a more productive life, one in which you feel a sense of vitality, cooperation, harmony, balance and reverence within yourself and in all your encounters” (p. 57). In other words, Winfrey planned to help her readers achieve new personhood in every life aspect. This goal reflected what Damon-Moore (1994) called “an abiding faith in the possibility of improvement” (p. 48).

Traditional ideas of service -- including improving the home environment and the home menu -- materialized in the first issue in May/June 2000. For example, the magazine promised “5 Fabulous Things to do with Fresh Strawberries” (p. 236) along with the secrets to “Art Smith’s sweet-potato salad” (p. 194). The joys of decorating with “warm shades of white” were explored (p. 198) and the mysteries of flower arranging were discussed (294). The July/August 2000 issue yielded menus for perfect patio and picnic meals (204) and tips on organizing dresser drawers (24). Early readers of *O, The Oprah Magazine* gained recipes for culinary delights from Caesar salad worthy of the Four Seasons (September 2000, 211-212) to decadent desserts such as tiramisu (November 2000) and 12-layer chocolate cake (December 2000). Meanwhile, health topics from managing back pain (September 2000) to self-diagnosis of low-grade depression (October 2000) and borderline alcoholism (December 2000) were tackled. Relationships also were addressed in articles such as “He cheated: He lied. Now what?” (p. 122) That article was closely followed by one titled “The Second Time Around: A young widow thought she’d never remarry until a stranger on a Harley changed her mind” (p. 268).

Monthly elements of service also cropped up in the advice of experts on topics from finance to personal fitness. Financial expert Suze Orman answered letters from readers and offered tips on saving, keeping tabs on personal credit card debt and the importance of wills in her monthly column “Financial Freedom.” Dr. Phil tackled relationship questions in the monthly “Tell It Like It Is.” Meanwhile, Winfrey’s personal trainer Bob Greene contributed weight loss and fitness advice in the occasional guests spot (January 2003).

O, The Oprah Magazine also offered help with parenting (Funderberg, 2002; Morgenstern, 2002; Smith, 2001; and Housden, 2002); career choices and performance (Cortina, 2000; Lague, 2001; Lichtenberg, 2001); and tips for everything from better dressing to posing for photographs (Kogan, 2001). The January 2003 issue of *O, The Oprah Magazine* provided a microcosm of the overall service mission of the magazine. A special section promised “A month-by-month plan to shape up your body, your mind, and your life” (130-154) and featured articles on topics ranging from alternative medicine to being assertive in a doctor’s office. The same issue also offered readers “The cure for chaos” on pages 67-68. The article was further billed the article as a “12-month plan to bring order into your life” (p. 2). The section also held out achievement of financial health with the help of Suze Orman through

“Twelve Steps to Wealth” (p. 37). Here was a magazine that did everything.

O, The Oprah Magazine, also served its readers through news coverage. Readers learned about a murder-suicide involving teens in Westwood, California (March 2003) as well as dangerous behavior among sexually active pre-teen and teen-aged girls. Readers also learned of the latest study on the dangers of sleep deprivation (November 2002) and developments in breast cancer research and stroke research (October 2002). The tragedy of September 11 prompted an in-depth interview by Winfrey of New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani. In sum, even if she did not read her local daily paper or otherwise keep abreast of world events the reader of *O, The Oprah Magazine* kept current through the magazine.

In the first three years of publication *O, The Oprah Magazine*, was a special interest magazine with women as a target audience. At the same time the publication addressed the general interest needs of its readers. *O, The Oprah Magazine* was a women’s service magazine for the twenty-first century.

O, The Oprah (celebrity) Magazine

For many living at the turn of the twentieth century Oprah Winfrey was the ultimate celebrity. She was recognized around the world and welcomed into millions of homes each weekday. Judging by the company she kept in the pages of her magazine she also was welcomed into the Rolodexes and homes of celebrated writers, politicians, movie stars and fashion designers. Winfrey also was revered as a woman of letters through her on-air book club that uncovered new literary voices while exposing classics to a wider audience. Her talk show won numerous awards. Winfrey was recognized for her philanthropy, including the urban legend of her giving millions of dollars to close friends and business associates from her personal fortune. Her appearance in a designer gown on the cover of her magazine led to floods of orders for the dress (O’Leary, 2001). Celebrity watchers were and remain interested in Oprah Winfrey as a celebrity and her celebrity cachet is put to good use in *O, The Oprah Magazine*.

In the thirty-four issues studied the hallmark of the celebrity magazine genre in *O, The Oprah Magazine* was the monthly celebrity profile interview. Winfrey conducted these interviews herself. Profiles included Martha Stewart (September 2000), the Dalai Lama (August 2001), Tom Hanks (September 2001), Jane Fonda (July/August 2000), Nelson Mandela (April 2001); Madeleine Albright (December 2001); Laura Bush (May 2001); Muhammad Ali (June 2001); Venus and Serena Williams (March 2003); Nicole Kidman, Meryl Streep and Julianne Moore (January 2003); and Ralph Lauren (October 2002). The profiles followed a formula. A first-person introduction by Winfrey reinforced the importance of the featured celebrity. The introduction was followed by an extended question and answer session that showcased Winfrey in the transcripts of her questions as much as it did the celebrity in the transcripts of the answers. For example, in her in-depth interview of Martha Stewart Winfrey asked, “Are you ever in awe of yourself now?” Stewart replied, “Oh no. I take myself seriously but not that seriously. And I wouldn’t want to be in awe of myself, ever, because it’s not right. You have to be circumspect” (p. 218). Their roles as interviewee and interviewer were interchangeable. It was almost as if Winfrey was talking to herself and in a way she is.

Celebrities profiled by Winfrey were A-List personalities of a status equal to their interviewer. In other words, has-beens, wanna-bes, and flash-in-the-pans need not expect an audience with Winfrey. In these interviews Winfrey spoke to her fellow celebrities as colleagues and appeared in at least one photograph with her interview subjects. For example, a photograph of Winfrey and Stewart strolling through Stewart’s garden accompanied the interview with Stewart. Winfrey, Moore, Streep, and Kidman formed a Rockette or cancan kick line in the photograph displayed with Winfrey’s interview with the movie stars about their Hollywood movie *The Hours* (January 2003). The interview texts and accompanying photographs made explicit to readers that these people were Winfrey’s friends. Moreover, a privilege was implied in that Winfrey’s celebrity alone provided admittance into the lifestyles of the rich and famous. Such admittance was not accorded to just anyone.

Readers also probed into Winfrey's own celebrity in features centered on events in her life including holiday parties at her home (December 2002) and embarking on a new fitness regimen (January 2003). Her monthly column "What I Know For Sure" offered monthly insight into Winfrey's past and present. The column closed each issue and offered readers access to Winfrey's intimate thoughts on being sued (April 2002) or speaking in front of strangers for the first time (September 2000). Such elements combined to show Winfrey's celebrated life as less than perfect. In comparison to Winfrey's hectic life, readers' lives were less stressful and more satisfying in keeping with the longstanding appeal of the celebrity magazine (Honey, 1972). The reader's life was superior in ordinariness when compared to the extraordinary life circumstances of Winfrey, who lacked nothing. In other words, wealth and power did not guarantee happiness but instead prompted complications and contemplation (Honey, 1972).

In keeping with the tradition of celebrity magazines the celebrity condition was demystified and dissected in the pages of *O, The Oprah Magazine* (Honey, 1972). For example, readers learned what happened behind the scenes in a photo shoot for a cover of the magazine (March, 2001) and witnessed Winfrey working out (January 2003). The underlying message was that celebrated Oprah Winfrey was not flawless.

O, The Oprah Magazine employed celebrities and their cachet in other ways. In the thirty-four issues examined, celebrities recommended their favorite book, or books, in the monthly segment "Books That Made a Difference." They also discussed life-changing events in their lives in the monthly column "Aha Moment" and spoke to world events. For example, the article titled "The Day That Shook Our World" about September 11 was a collection of comments from the likes of Mike Wallace, Quincy Jones, and syndicated columnist Liz Smith (September 2002, 126-128).

Interestingly celebrity as defined in the pages of *O, The Oprah Magazine*, carried with it a certain intelligence. This point perhaps was best illustrated in the treatment of fashion models. Arguably models, especially supermodels, are women known primarily for being celebrities. In first three years of *O, The Oprah Magazine* editorial fashion pages so often the territory of highly paid models were populated by ordinary women. Models included office managers, accountants, and professional dancers. When supermodels appeared they were singled out as entrepreneurs, writers, or smart business professionals. For example, fashion model Christy Turlington, the celebrated face of Calvin Klein and Ann Taylor clothing campaigns, was featured in the pages of *O, The Oprah Magazine* because of her devotion to yoga and the book she wrote about the exercise discipline (November, 2002). Model Alek Wek was presented for the line of leather goods she designed to honor her father (March 2002). And Janice Dickinson was featured for her memoir about her days as a fashion model in the 1970s and 1980s (October 2002). Arguably, such portrayals updated the traditional celebrity magazine theme of the "unhappy, bored, dissatisfied" (Honey, 1972, p. 61) celebrity with everything. These celebrity models improved their lives through ordinary means such as yoga, starting a business or writing a book. By including such articles *O, The Oprah Magazine* implied that similar levels of improvement were open to readers.

O, The Oprah (boutique) Magazine

O, The Oprah Magazine successfully crossbred the women's service and the celebrity magazine to create a publication that subscribers, advertisers, and media critics alike pointed to as something special. *Rosie* tried to capitalize on the same formula. Publishers literally added the celebrity of talk show host Rosie O'Donnell to an existing women's service publication. But the project did not command the success of *O, The Oprah Magazine* even prior to the very public legal squabbles between Rosie O'Donnell and publisher Gruner and Jahr (Carr, 2002). Winfrey offered value-added extras to her publication that few had the means to duplicate. For example, her monthly "O List" let readers imagine sharing something with the talk show host. However, few readers likely had the wherewithal to afford luxury items such as \$325 cashmere bedroom slippers (March 2001), a \$1,375 cashmere blanket (January 2002), or a \$1,430 leather overnight case (December 2002). In the issues reviewed each "O List" opened with the declaration "A few

things I think are great – Oprah.”

Another significant extra was the cover of the magazine. Each cover featured Winfrey in a glossy photograph worthy of framing. Covers often featured Winfrey in glamorous close-ups (June 2001; June 2002; September 2001; and December 2001). She also appeared engaged in elite sports such as piloting a convertible sports car (April 2001), romping on the deck of a nicely appointed sailboat (July/August 2000), and horseback riding (July 2002). She was pictured in the midst of ordinary activities such as throwing snowballs (January 2001), painting at an easel (November, 2001), splashing through a waterfall (August 2002), or opening the door to a holiday party set at her home (December 2002). Each stylized shot was as much a keepsake as a cover to a monthly magazine. In combination with the autographed signature at the bottom of the monthly opening column written by Winfrey and titled “Here We Go” the magazine covers helped produce a very personal and intimate feel to the publication. *O, The Oprah Magazine* was packaged as a gift from Oprah Winfrey to readers.

Boutique details included monthly giveaways of such items as lipstick, shoes, and handbags. The section “Oprah To Go” was another embellishment exclusive to *O, The Oprah Magazine*. The latter featured clip-and-save postcards and bookmarks of inspirational quotes to give to friends, stick in a wallet, or tape to a refrigerator door. The monthly centerfold “Breathing Space” displayed photos of lush landscapes from beaches to mountains to meadows. Readers were encouraged to escape their day-to-day lives through daydreaming about the scene or using the photo to prompt a moment of personal meditation. Readers also were asked to contemplate life lessons in writing and other journal assignments included throughout the magazine. The interactivity of *O, The Oprah Magazine* further contributed to its appeal by drawing the reader into the magazine through participation. Each magazine held out the possibility of an intimate exchange between Oprah Winfrey and the reader while at the same time offering the reader the dependable quality of a mass circulation media product. During the period studied magazine creators raised the newsstand price of the magazine from \$2.95 to \$3.50, claiming the higher price better reflected the quality of the magazine (Gonser, 2001). The oversized glossy magazine, dripping with the luxury implied by fame and celebrity while at the same time addressing the needs of a women’s service magazine audience, was worth the price.

Readers Write

In its first thirty-four issues *O, The Oprah Magazine* owed its success to its mix of elements from the traditional women’s service and celebrity magazine genres. The formula was not new but proved highly successful in the hands of Hearst Magazines, Harpo Inc., and Oprah Winfrey herself. *O, The Oprah Magazine* added a collection of special features to keep readers interested. The result was a publication many magazine industry watchers celebrated as near a miracle as the industry witnessed in years. In an interview for the industry website <http://www.iwantmedia.com> magazine industry expert/consultant Samir Husni called the magazine innovative. His tone rivaled the self-promoting press put out by the magazine when he hailed *O, The Oprah Magazine* as “a new kind of magazine that covers 360 degrees of a women’s life” on the website <http://www.themagazineguys.com/oprah>.

Advertisers adored *O, The Oprah Magazine* as well. Luxury makeup companies Estée Lauder, Lancôme, and Chanel advertised between the covers as did high-end car companies such as Mazda, Nissan, and Subaru. Fashion companies such as Liz Claiborne also placed advertisements in the pages of *O, The Oprah Magazine* (O’Leary, 2001). In its early issues before gaining a reputation as a top selling magazine *O, The Oprah Magazine* displayed ads from designers Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger, children’s clothiers Baby Gap and Calvin Klein Jeans Kids, luxury cosmetics companies Estée Lauder, Lancôme, and Clinique, technology companies Microsoft and Hewlett Packard, lingerie seller Victoria’s Secret, career focused clothing companies Jones New York and Talbot’s, luxury car company Cadillac, financial services companies Prudential, Morgan Stanley Dean Witter, and Aetna, and high end cat food brand Fancy Feast.

However, *O, The Oprah Magazine* did not owe its success only to critics and industry watchers. Readers contribute to the success of any publication and readers of *O, The Oprah Magazine* responded by buying the magazine off magazine racks and subscribing in record numbers. Industry trackers *Advertising Age* included the magazine in its top 300 the year of its debut, ranking it 105th in 2000 and calculating paid circulation at 2,162,668 in the six issues of 2000. In 2001, the magazine jumped to twenty-eighth. Established women's magazine *Glamour* held the twenty-eighth slot in 2000 when *O, The Oprah Magazine* debuted. Paid circulation grew by about 400,000 and reached 2.5 million by 2001, according to the website for *Advertising Age*. In other words, readers of *O, The Oprah Magazine* bought the magazine and brought it, or had it delivered, home.

Readers enjoyed what *O, The Oprah Magazine* offered, especially the elements of the traditional women's magazine and the celebrity magazine. Their pleasure was reflected in the monthly section "We Hear You." This research drew upon a sample of 81 letters to assess readers' perception of *O, The Oprah Magazine*. The letters were published in issues from July/August 2000 to April 2003. The May/June 2000 issue was not used in developing the sample because readers' letters were not included in the debut issue. Letters in every fifth issue were examined. The sample included: December 2000, May 2001, October 2001, March 2002, August 2002 and January 2003. Letters were reviewed in the three broad categories of celebrity, service, or both. Letters not fitting into those categories were placed in the category of "other." This last category accommodated a variety of letters.

For this basic analysis the category of celebrity was defined by aspiration, admiration, inspiration, or imitation expressed by the reader for a well-known person featured in the magazine. For example, in December 2002 reader Janice Fore wrote, "What especially caught my eye in the October issue was the interview with Sidney Poitier. I've had a crush on him since I first saw him in the movies. Not only is he a beautiful man on the outside but he's every bit as beautiful inside" (p. 34).

Service was defined through an application or utility expressed by the reader. In March 2002, reader Nancy Nieter wrote in to say she was thrilled to find the recipe for Banana-Bourbon French Toast in an earlier issue after losing the recipe a decade before. She wrote, "I will tear out the article and never lose this recipe again" (p. 30).

Some letters fulfilled both categories. The researcher took this as particularly indicative of the success of *O, The Oprah Magazine* as a hybrid of the women's service and celebrity genres. In May 2001, reader Dawn Dvorak wrote, "I loved the March article 'Blowing Our Cover.' It was great to see that Oprah is a down-to-earth person... Thank you for showing me how easy it is to be happy with the way God intended me to be – natural. I now feel better about going without makeup. I love my looks, and by the way, you look great, too, Oprah" (p. 32). Dvorak admired Oprah Winfrey as a celebrity who was being photographed for a magazine cover. Dvorak also planned to take inspiration from the article and go without makeup.

Readers mentioned celebrity in twenty-one percent of letters to the magazine while forty-three percent mentioned women's service. About five percent were combination letters. Such figures indicated to this researcher that the hybrid nature of *O, The Oprah Magazine* was attractive to and a hit with readers.

In sum, readers most often wrote to comment on how *O, The Oprah Magazine* fulfilled its hybrid mission as a celebrity or women's service publication. Readers also wrote in for other reasons. Some readers expressed general praise for the magazine's layout and colors. Others criticized photographs used with articles and the lack of full-figured women featured in the fashion sections. Other readers offered their reading rituals with magazine. Readers used letters to give advice to fellow readers. Others thanked specific writers, magazine staffers and, sometimes, Oprah herself while still others presented testimonials on how articles impact their lives or sparked specific emotional reactions such as tears or anger. About thirty-six percent of letter writers addressed items outside the celebrity and women's service genres.

Notably, *O, The Oprah Magazine* attracted a reader different than the audience of devoted viewers of Oprah Winfrey's weekday talk show. Regular viewers were anticipated to pick up the magazine out of established fan loyalty to Winfrey. However, in general magazine subscribers showed characteristics different than that of viewers. According to industry trackers The Magazine Guys, the typical *O, The Oprah Magazine* reader was about 42 years old and a college graduate. She was married with children and owned a home valued at about \$166,000. Viewers were less likely to have college degrees or own such valuable homes. Interestingly, about twelve percent of readers of *O, The Oprah Magazine* were men like letter writer W. Blaise Dismar of Georgia who wrote, "I bought my first issue of *O* today and I must say I found it refreshing, original and nurturing. And I'm a guy!" (p. 40). Other readers considered unexpected when compared to viewers of Winfrey's talk show included Karen DeChant, a 24-year old cancer survivor who responded to a book review, and Melinda Cronin, 17, who responded to an article about teenaged girls and sex. As noted by critics *O, The Oprah Magazine* attracted readers beyond the expected fan base of Oprah Winfrey's weekday talk show. Magazine readers were better educated, wealthier and older than regular viewers of the Oprah talk show.

Discussion and conclusions

From the debut issue in May/June 2000 *O, The Oprah Magazine* was a highly successful hybrid. Drawing upon elements from the women's service and the celebrity magazine genres, the magazine was so appealing that it set a startup record without precedent. The hybrid continued to thrive in its first three years of publication. The magazine held its own against established competitors such as Hearst sister publication *Good Housekeeping* and newer titles such as *In Style* while at the same time outlasting blatant imitators such as *Rosie*.

O, The Oprah Magazine successfully combined the wide appeal the women's service magazine epitomized by publications such as *Ladies' Home Journal* (Damon-Moore, 1994) and the implied luxury of the celebrity magazine where the extravagant was the everyday and the extraordinary was made to appear ordinary if not somehow lacking the security of ordinary life (Honey, 1972). Interestingly, like a fellow successful hybrid *Men's Health* from publisher Rodale Press, *O, The Oprah Magazine* effectively appealed to a particular niche while at the same time attracting a broader spectrum of readers. *O, The Oprah Magazine* attracted professional women in their 30s and 40s as its niche while drawing in teens, twenty-somethings and men. The magazine also pulled in members of the "Oprah" talk show audience along with magazine fans who picked up a copy of *O, The Oprah Magazine* at their local grocery, drug or discount department store, chain bookstore or local newsstand. *O, The Oprah Magazine* was different enough to be novel. However, it was not novel enough to be strange to readers. In its first three years *O, The Oprah Magazine* was friendly and confident like its namesake Oprah Winfrey.

In its thirty four issues *O, The Oprah Magazine* outpaced similar publications. It thrived while established titles such as *Mademoiselle*, *Walking, Mode, Talk*, and *Teen Magazine* folded (Davis, 2002). Arguably, its influence rippled onto newsstands, particularly in the escalation of celebrity. For example, *Harper's Bazaar* bedecked the June 2003 issue with the three lead actresses of the Hollywood movie *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*. *Vanity Fair* packed its July 2003 cover and issue with teen celebrities en masse, including Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen, Mandy Moore, Hilary Duff, and Amanda Bynes. Even the venerable *Time* magazine got into the act and featured the cast of the movie *Matrix Reloaded* on 12 May 2003.

Meanwhile, pristine specimens of the celebrity and service genres continued to thrive. Women's service magazines *Good Housekeeping*, *Family Circle*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Women's Day* still spoke to readers. The magazines placed sixth, seventh, eighth and tenth respectively in the top 300 magazines of 2002 as ranked by AdAge.com. And celebrity focused magazines such as *People Weekly*, *Us Weekly*, and *In Style* continued to tantalize and titillate readers with tales of Hollywood scandals, celebrity love affairs and stories of what celebrities like to wear, eat and do for fun.

Arguably, a counter argument surfaced to *O, The Oprah Magazine*, and the strict service and celebrity magazines targeted at women from which *O, The Oprah Magazine* took inspiration. Interestingly, these counter arguments found their footing about the same time *O, The Oprah Magazine* made headlines. For example, lifestyle title *RealSimple* was often mentioned with *O, The Oprah Magazine* as examples of successful new magazines. *RealSimple* eschewed celebrities and encouraged readers to take fewer cues from the Joneses and live simply and with their own personal style. *RealSimple* shared this sensibility with the likes of magazines *Budget Living* and *ReadyMade*, a do-it-yourself guide for the young and trendy. *Lucky*, a magazine about shopping, also avoided celebrity, at least at first. Likened to a catalog, the magazine offered street and email addresses and contact information about featured products to help readers get hold of the perfect purse, skirt, shoes, or pair of jeans. Anonymous models appeared on the cover until summer 2003 when the magazine succumbed to the draw of celebrity and featured actress/singer Mandy Moore (Carr, 2003).

O, The Oprah Magazine is a multi-faceted publication warranting study. This qualitative study attempted to look only at the magazine as a hybrid of two established magazine genres with a smattering of special attractions to keep readers interested. Other facets worth future study include the spiritual quality of the magazine often mentioned by critics and manifested in content through such articles such as Oprah Winfrey's in-depth interview with the Dalai Lama (August 2001). Reader letters also illustrated the sense of the spiritual in the magazine. For example, in letters best described as testimonials readers wrote of taking action and engaging in life outside the home through charities or ministering to friends and family. The fashion spreads in *O, The Oprah Magazine* also may warrant study in part because of the reputation of the magazine as a publication that speaks to women from different races, ethnicities, and of varying physical types and sizes.

Other future points of study include the business plan from conceptualization to execution of *O, The Oprah Magazine*. It is anticipated that such a study of the plan will provide insight into the success of the magazine. This researcher also anticipates such a study clueing future magazine creators into how to duplicate the success of *O, The Oprah Magazine* and potentially revive the magazine industry, an industry often evaluated as in a prolonged slump (Davis, 2002). Future study must also include the mechanical aspects of the magazine such as layout, photography, color choices, and size in effort to tap into the recipe of success of *O, The Oprah Magazine*.

In the first three years and thirty-four issues of *O, The Oprah Magazine* success was rooted in the overall appeal of the magazine as part women's service magazine and part celebrity magazine with a handful of boutique features to attract readers. The formula was not new. It was, however, highly successful in the hands of magazine industry stalwart Hearst Magazines and celebrity brand company Harpo Incorporated. Advertisers and readers flocked to the magazine early on. Industry watchers noticed, awarding the *O, The Oprah Magazine* several high honors in its debut years. Fellow magazine publishers also noticed and at least one publisher launched an imitating publication. However, only time will tell of the lasting impact of *O, The Oprah Magazine*.

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Appendix

2000

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