DIRTY, SEXY, VANITY:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE POWER OF CONDÉ NAST IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION

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ABSTRACT

“OPINION HAS CAUSED MORE TROUBLE ON THIS LITTLE EARTH THAN PLAGUES OR EARTHQUAKES,”
VOLTAIRE

Journalism scholars have often discounted the credibility and influence of cultural magazines, specifically magazines such as Vanity Fair, Vogue and GQ, and their ability to both shape and maintain public discourse. Dismissed as catering primarily to elite audiences, these magazines have managed to disseminate their views to the masses through the public intellectual journalists who write for them, influencing public opinion according to their own priorities. This thesis positions itself as an examination of the readers and the writers associated with Vanity Fair, Vogue and GQ, and the compliance of the masses to the public discourses espoused by such magazines. Through survey work, focus groups, content analyses and interviews with industry professionals, the seductive infrastructure established at Condé Nast is revealed, illustrating the symbiotic relationship between cultural producers at the top publishing company in the world, and their cultural consumers.

Key words: Vanity Fair, Vogue, GQ, Condé Nast, public intellectual, public opinion
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Chapter 1. Introduction

“People don’t seem to realize that their opinion of the world is also a confession of character,”
Ralph Waldo Emerson

A nation’s culture is a testament to the values and experiences of its inhabitants. When such values are dictated by voices that are louder than those of the masses, a hierarchy develops between those who produce culture and those who consume it. A society’s intellectual elite population has traditionally been deemed as the producers of culture, disseminating their notion of ‘culture’ to the masses through political, social, and economic means. The interests of those in power become consequently the interests of the masses, as those in the public domain attempt to adopt the cultural sensibilities of the intellectual elite. With the age-old trope “keeping up with the Jones” continuing to prosper, it can be argued that the masses are turning to a variety of mediums in order to stay informed – whether politically, socially, or culturally. Within this landscape emerge cultural magazines where the cultural onus is placed on journalists, who allow their readers to become spectators in the cultural dialogue of the intellectual elite – offering them a glimpse, but never an invitation. The publics’ understanding of events, and therefore public opinion, becomes instantly constructed according to the priorities of the press.

The publishing powerhouse, Condé Nast, has become the prototype of successful publishing strategies through the manner in which their magazines, such as, *Vanity Fair, Vogue,* and *GQ,* create their own interpretation of what is considered to be of interest to the public. In attempting to control public discourse through their articles, these magazines end up
focusing instead on the public interests of those in power, and catering to their sensibilities, which in turn seduces the public according to their ideals.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how the journalists who write for magazines at Condé Nast, magazines such as *Vanity Fair, Vogue*, and *GQ*, shape public discourse as a result of their clout as public intellectuals. More specifically, the research question is: how much does the authority of a publication (*Vanity Fair, Vogue*, and *GQ*) affect readers’ understanding and acceptance of the content? A multi-method approach was employed in this pilot study. Through the use of focus groups, content analyses, an online survey, and interviews with industry professionals, Condé Nast’s seductive infrastructure that maintains society’s cultural capital is revealed.

Scholars have generally dismissed cultural magazines as being on par with tabloid journalism, often placing them at the bottom of various hierarchies of journalism. However, due to the influential nature of magazines such as *Vanity Fair, Vogue*, and *GQ*, it is essential to consider how these magazines can be considered to be cultural conduits in the manner in which they shape the opinions of their readers. This thesis positions itself as an examination of the readers and the writers associated with these three influential magazines, and the compliance of the masses to the public discourses espoused by such magazines.

According to political communications theorist, Sean Aday, there exists a hierarchy in the field of journalism between which organizations receive information directly from a source, and which ones receive it through the grapevine (2004). Aday’s hierarchy, as illustrated below, outlines various news outlets and their ability to spread information (see Model 1.1).
Model 1.1 – The Medium of the (News) Message

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sean Aday’s ‘Hierarchy Within Hierarchy’: Different Outlets Ability to Spread Activation of Counter-Frames</th>
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<tr>
<td>ABC/CBS/NBC/CNN</td>
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<td>Evening News</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boston Globe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Atlantic Monthly/The New Yorker</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other Magazines and Chains</td>
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<td>NPR</td>
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Aday argues that *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* are at the forefront of this scale and manage to shape a given news story accordingly and then pass it along the press chain, to magazines, which are ranked at the lowest level (2004). The hierarchy of organizations that Aday developed is a key component of Robert Entman’s Cascade Model Theory, which illustrates “the way news feeds back information about the public to officials, and thereby influences their actions” (Entman 2003: 432). In listing cultural magazines, such
as The Atlantic and The New Yorker, as occupying the last category of importance in spreading the activation of counter frames, it appears that Aday is discounting the power of the intellectual in shaping public discourse. Therefore, it is important to examine what kind of culture is being represented in various magazines at Condé Nast (such as Vanity Fair, GQ, and Vogue) since it can be argued that they are shaping public discourse.

In fact, Aday’s table can be re-formatted (see Model 1.2). As a publishing house, Condé Nast has resources that allow it to produce high quality journalism that can be considered to be as influential as an article in the New York Times. Given that many of the publications at Condé Nast are monthly periodicals, magazines such as Vanity Fair, for example, are able to do in-depth investigations to provide feature stories to their readers that they would not have access to anywhere else.
Model 1.2 –
The Place for Cultural Journalism in the News World

Pieces that appear in their periodicals are often cited in other media and are picked up by the media circuit, referenced on *The Rachel Maddow Show* to *Late Night with David Letterman* to *The Today Show*. For example, Christopher Hitchens’s first-hand account of being water boarded was cited in various publications, including *The New York Times*, *New York Magazine*, *The Guardian*, and *The Telegraph*. As a result, it can be argued that Condé Nast publications have earned a place toward the top of Aday’s hierarchy as a result of their influential nature on the public and on other news sources. Specifically, the influence that Condé Nast magazines have on the public and their understanding of current affairs – be it
cultural, political or social – should not be undermined. The relevance of magazines such as *Vanity Fair, Vogue,* and *GQ,* in shaping a particular dialogue between news producers and news consumers is significant due primarily to the reputation of the magazine, its aesthetics, and the writers who contribute each month as public intellectuals, maintaining a particular conversation between those striving to be part of such a culture, and those seeking to maintain their position.

In *Weapons of Mass Distortion,* Brent Bozell III eloquently argues that once long-standing creators of political and cultural influence are starting to be dethroned, and who will take over is anyone’s guess:

For decades the liberal media went completely unchallenged, save for the occasional *National Review,* George Will, or Paul Harvey. As a result, the American Left enjoyed a cherished power: the ability to determine who and what is considered news in this country. More important, the liberal media could not only influence but could actually *set* the political agenda in this country. That gave extraordinary power to unelected editors, reporters, and producers to direct policy, affect culture, and make the occasional politician or government official – or destroy him. But those heady days are ending for the Left (2004: 259).

For example, consider, *Vanity Fair,* Condé Nast’s “cultural catalyst”, destined to help cultivate the cultural reality of today’s society. The magazine is considered by some to be primarily a liberal publication, yet subtly influenced by capitalist tendencies. *Vanity Fair’s* Editor-in-Chief, Graydon Carter, offers readers a liberal leaning rant in each monthly editorial, and yet
the articles in each issue cater predominantly to capitalist perspectives. While the *Vanity Fair* reader demographic has often been dismissed as catering to the overly cultured sect of educated ingénues, Carter claims that in recent years the magazine’s readership has shifted:

I have a fashion reader. I have a political readership. I have a literary readership. I have New York’s social scene, Hollywood. I have America. I have Europe. I have a readership that consists entirely of baby boomer divorcees who drive matching Astrovans in Sapulpa, Oklahoma. I have two guys in a cocktail lounge in Michigan who think the In-and-Out list is “very cheeky”. I have a soccer mom in Des Moines whose four-year old slipped the February issue into her shopping cart while she was in the checkout line in Wal-Mart. I have a young woman in the Bloomberg administration who circles my editor’s letter references to the smoking ban with a yellow highlighter.

And, oh yes, my mother reads it … most of the time (Carr July 22, 2002: D6).

While Carter’s rant about the diversity of the magazine’s readership seems almost all-encompassing, CondéNet Media Kit states that the average *Vanity Fair* reader is 39.5 years old; 79 per cent of their readers are male; and, the average income of their readers is $69,265.00. The magazine has an annual circulation of 4.8 million readers. However, in light of the fact that 2008 has been termed “the worst year for the magazine publishing industry”, *Vanity Fair* has readjusted many of their longstanding journalistic tropes for the sake of the American dollar – hoping to recruit new readers and increase sales. On November 14, 2008, *The Huffington Post* published an article titled, “*Vanity Fair* hit hardest by economic crisis”.

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The article cites the loss of a Condé Nast marketing supplement, titled “Movies Rock” as one of the main reasons for the magazine’s loss in advertising revenue. The article states,

According to publishers' estimates to be filed by the Publishers Information Bureau, fashion magazines on the whole reported double-digit drops through 2008. For most, the declines represented cyclical changes in the economy. Others had more specific challenges – for example, Condé Nast's fashion magazines carried fewer pages in December because of the company's decision to forego the marketing program “Movies Rock”. *Vanity Fair* lost 84 pages as a result of the cancellation of the supplement. The magazine for the entire year had 1,917 ad pages, or 15.3% fewer than in 2007, suffering also from the writers' strike earlier this year, which reduced the amount of promotional spending around new movies and television shows (Huffingtonpost.com/vanityfair/2008/11/14).

Huffington’s conclusions closely parallel the main tenets raised by Bozell. As President of the Media Research Center, a conservative media watchdog organization, Bozell attributes the rise of cable television and “the change in viewing habits created by the twenty-four hour news channels” (2004: 252); the Internet, “which can provide news whenever a person wants it” (2004: 252); and, “the growing apathy for news and the lack of interest in reading” (2004: 252), to the demise of the liberal media in the United States. Magazines like *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *GQ* are suffering from a similar demise. In order to compete with the power of the instant gratification syndrome that has swept the U.S. as a result of the 24-hour news channel
and the Internet, magazines, such as those published by Condé Nast, are fighting to stay afloat in the American media landscape.

Bozell argues that conservative journalism has “every reason to brim with confidence” (2004: 263). With magazines, such as *Vanity Fair*, *GQ*, and *Vogue*, attempting to redefine their mandates in terms of the priorities of shareholders and subscribers, Bozell’s prediction may be correct: “The political discourse in this country is spirited, and on many issues – the economy, the proper role of government, foreign policy, national security, social issues, and much more – conservatives can enjoy an energetic debate with liberals” (2004: 248). Such a debate is being played out every month at Condé Nast, as editors in chief Graydon Carter (*Vanity Fair*), Anna Wintour (*Vogue*), and Jim Nelson (*GQ*), attempt to balance both the checkbook and editorial content.

Writing in 2004, Bozell warned readers in his conclusion that “the liberal media may dominate at the moment, but the media landscape is changing rapidly” (2004: 259). Five years later, Bozell’s prediction has become a reality. The liberal media and the voices associated with the medium, be it print or broadcast, have had to redefine their standard in order to stay afloat. In journalism circles, those writers who become either correspondents or contributors at any of the magazines at Condé Nast are instantly deemed to be the ‘intellectuals’ or experts of their given subject matter. According to historian Eric Goldman, in the 1950s and 1960s, intellectuals were defined as “a large, amorphous group of academics, writers, editors, staff at foundations, certain types of lawyers, and a scattering of others who make their living primarily from talking, writing, research or some combination of these” (2001: 301). Today,
intellectuals, or ‘public intellectuals’ as some scholars have termed them, have a significant influence on engendering a specific form of public opinion:

These public intellectuals were often relatively well-known generalists who were willing to speak or write about most subjects, but always injecting their own worldview into their various endeavors… The most famous group of public intellectuals, the New York intellectuals, often worked as freelance writers, edited small magazines, and taught part-time at universities. Given this unaffiliated status, their livelihood often depended on their productivity, encouraging prolific writing. As a result, their frequent writings made the New York intellectuals – and public intellectuals in general – influential beyond their numbers (Troy 2002: 13).

Given that the role of intellectuals in shaping public politics is often not realized by the masses, it is crucial to examine the opportunities these intellectuals have in shaping public discourse. It can be argued that such intellectuals are dominating the country’s public discourse. The public therefore trusts the power of their pen as they set out to either promote or penalize the character of the moment. In defining society’s cultural and political narrative, journalists affiliated with Condé Nast seek to provide readers with a perspective of prestige that privileges the movers and shakers of the cultural scene. With some of the top print media being written by such prominent journalists as James Wolcott, Christopher Hitchens, Jane Meyer, Carl Bernstein, and Maureen Orth, a distinct cultural voice is emerging. It is important to consider the agency of these journalists and how the medium through which they convey their message,
is slowly but surely shaping a distinct cultural voice in a manner that is privileging the
lifestyles of a select few.

Many of these journalists could have been considered muckrakers during the early days of
journalism, a time when those with a pen and a paper challenged those in power by giving a
voice to the powerless with every piece they wrote. Today, the writers at Condé Nast can be
considered ‘public intellectuals’, based on the manner in which, at face value, they offer
readers a more intellectually-crafted and elitist perspective on a variety of issues. According to
political activist and linguist, Noam Chomsky, public intellectuals work with the best interests
of the masses in mind, not the interests that make the best feature stories in magazines such as
Vanity Fair or GQ, for example. Chomsky argues that public intellectuals have a responsibility
to the masses, and their intellect is in fact crucial for challenging the status-quo, not abiding by
it. In Peter Wilkin’s Noam Chomsky: On Power, Knowledge and Human Nature, the author
cites Chomsky’s notion concerning the shift of today’s public intellectuals, exchanging their
soapbox for a savings account, abandoning their anti-authoritarian antics in the pursuit of
catering to the agenda of those in power. Wilkins writes, “Chomsky’s critique is directed at
those public intellectuals whom he sees as having given up the classic Enlightenment
conception of the role of the intellectual as challenger to illegitimate authority and power, and
who have instead become the servants or defenders of oppressive institutions and structures of
power” (1997: 86). It can be argued that many of the more prominent writers at Condé Nast are
guilty of Chomsky’s realizations. As Chomsky stated in American Power and the New
Mandarins, a seminal text on the power of American authority, “It is the responsibility of
intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies” (1969: 325). In his work, Chomsky asks, “Are intellectuals, the upholders of truth and the critics of illegitimate authority?” While Chomsky is quick to argue that the public intellectual owes it to the masses to decipher the political priorities of those in power, communication scholar Barbie Zelizer argues that it is the role of journalists in fact to build those bridges between those in positions of power and the public understanding of the issues at hand. In her article, “Journalists as Interpretive Communities”, she argues that journalists generate their own understanding of key events and thus create their own discourse to disseminate to the public:

Such a dependence by journalists on their own collective character has its own place in scholarship on journalism… news as a form of knowledge … as ritual and a shared frame for understanding … news as pseudo-environment … [and] how journalists construct knowledge about themselves all suggest the importance of generating meaning through discourse. … The shared discourse that they produce is thus a marker of how they see themselves as journalists (1993: 223).

However, those journalists who write for Condé Nast publications do so as part of an interpretive community that abides not by the ‘public intellectual’ properties as defined by Chomsky, but by their own standard of influence as a result of the cultural clout that is cultivated by their magazines. This becomes problematic when journalists blessed with the ability to conjure up various perspectives and personal narratives to deliver to readers are dictated by a mandate that sets to “drive the popular dialogue globally”, whereas in fact, the dialogue that is being driven is one that privileges the interests of those in the fast lane.
Mapping the Moguls and the Masses

The second chapter in this thesis will outline theoretical approaches that will be used to examine the influence of journalists as public intellectuals in shaping the public’s understandings of specific issues. The theories that will be examined in this thesis will be analyzed in relation to existing literature on the topics of public opinion, persuasion, and media monopolies. Noam Chomsky’s notion of the ‘public intellectual’ will be considered in terms of what he describes as the two roles that the public intellectual plays in society – “the social and political critic” and “the secular priest”. Chomksy’s tenets will be analyzed with reference to Paul Lazarsfeld’s “two-step flow theory” and the power of opinion leaders to influence the masses. Daniel Yankelovich’s research on persuasion and public judgment will also be examined, complemented by Vincent Price’s historical interpretation of public opinion. Other works on media effects that will be analyzed include, Gustave LeBon’s ‘law of the mental unity of crowds’, and Walter Lippmann’s seminal work on public opinion research. All of these theoretical approaches will attempt to ground a concrete framework in which the analysis of the relationship between industry professionals (i.e. journalists associated with Condé Nast) and the consumers who read the magazines, will be examined. The third chapter on methodology will explain the multi-method approach that was applied in this pilot study. These methods included an online survey that measured the magazine consumption habits of respondents, focus groups based on the three aforementioned magazines being studied, content analyses for a year’s worth of magazine covers, and interviews with industry professionals at Condé Nast. Four methodological approaches based on Vincent Price’s four means of
measuring public opinion were employed in this study. Chapter four focuses on the analysis between both the theories and relevant literature applied in the previous chapters, in conjunction with collected data from both Condé Nast writers and Condé Nast consumers. In analyzing the methodologies employed, correlational relationships between these variables will be revealed in order to illustrate the influence of Condé Nast magazines in shaping public discourse. Specifically, the mechanisms through which these exchanges occur will be interpreted based on the reputational-association hypothesis, which predicts that Condé Nast magazine subscription is correlated with reputational association, and the perceived-status hypothesis, which contends that individuals who read Condé Nast magazines once a month or more, are more likely to believe that Americans consume tabloid journalism. Based on both the focus group findings and the interviews with industry professionals at Condé Nast, it is revealed that there is a disconnect in terms of the perceived message created by the magazine (Vanity Fair, Vogue, and GQ), and the public’s understanding of said message, based on the status of the medium through which the public received said message. These findings will be used to answer the overarching question: how much does the authority of the publication (i.e. Vanity Fair, Vogue, GQ), affect the reader’s understanding and acceptance of the content?
Chapter 2. Literature Review

“To speak with precision of public opinion, is a task not unlike coming to grips with the Holy Ghost,” (Key 1961: 8).

*L’Esprit Public: Defining Opinion for the People, by the People*

Historically, the formation of opinions and ideals has been deeply rooted in social structures, be they public or private. From the Parisian salons in Saint-Germain-des-Prés in the eighteenth century, to gang leaders in the streets of New York rioting against a military draft during the nineteenth century, to the smoky coffee shops in Haight Ashbury in the twentieth century, great minds and attentive spectators have gathered in public spaces to hear the agenda of the day from those deemed to know it all, or those at least able to garner enough of a following that they are perceived as worthy of attention. In recent years, however, a shift has occurred, with the masses relying instead on the ideas of those in positions of power, as opposed to the rants of the latest radical uttering manifestos over coffee and cigarettes. Such a shift has been documented by numerous communication scholars, social scientists, and political philosophers.

This chapter sets out to distinguish the fundamental findings about public opinion formation and maintenance from the perspectives of scholars who have examined it from a variety of viewpoints – including, the effects of crowd formation; societal influencers on consumption habits and the interests of peers; opinion leaders in
both the press and the public sphere; the interests of public intellectuals; and, the manner in which control is maintained by the values and motives of the intellectual elite sector of the population.

Vincent Price argues that the concept of public opinion has been adapted by social scientists for research purposes in order to mitigate theoretical debate. Price writes,

In spite of its currency, the concept of public opinion remains controversial. Since the advent of survey techniques and their application to public opinion in the early part of the 20th century, analysts have been continually forced to refine, adapt, and extend age-old conceptual and theoretical notions, in light of empirical research efforts (1992: 1)

While Price’s understanding of the origins and continuous skepticism surrounding the credibility of the definition of public opinion is grounded in theoretical findings, it is important to consider the definition, not according to its use by social scientists, but according to the public’s understanding of what they perceive as being ‘the opinion of the people’. In this pilot study, ‘the public’ will be defined as those individuals in a society who are regarded as spectators of social processes – the everyday man/woman. They are those who seek guidance from institutional apparatuses such as church, state, and news organizations. The public will also be considered to be synonymous with the
term ‘the masses,’ the body of a society that tends to be persuaded, not necessarily successfully, by the perspectives of those in power. The term “intellectual elite” will refer to a group of individuals who are considered by the masses to be privileged in a society. They are the change agents; the movers and shakers; the leaders of cultural, social and political discussion. Their societal status is maintained by the unspoken consent of the masses. They (the intellectual elite) are seen to be part of a higher social echelon. “Public opinion” is defined, for the sake of this pilot study, as the agreed understanding of the masses of the views and ideologies of the intellectual elite. It is an ideological construct that attempts to monitor society’s pulse, but in fact is both shaped and maintained by the priorities of those in power – the intellectual elite.

Price views public opinion according to historical tropes that align the term with ‘crowd’ and ‘mass behavior’. His book outlines, from an epistemological perspective, the manner in which conceptions of the public are rooted in a social-scientific understanding. Such an understanding of the concept of ‘public’ emerges from Gustave LeBon’s “law of the mental unity of crowds”. In *La Psychologie des Foules*, LeBon argues that as a result of the rise of the “popular classes” in modern society, a distinct grouping of individuals, referred to later as ‘crowds’, began emerging. LeBon argues that there are three distinct characteristics that enable crowds to form and subsequent opinions to be shaped:
(1) the anonymity of being in a crowd loosens civil restrictions over people’s baser instincts; (2) emotions and actions spread rapidly through spontaneous imitation and contagion; (3) ‘the conscious personality vanishes’ under the influence of a crowd, and the individual becomes subject to unconscious persuasion and suggestibility – that is, essentially hypnotized by the collective will of the crowd (1895: 27).

Price consistently quotes LeBon when arguing that it is both the emotional and non-rational appeals to the masses by those in power which cause the greatest detriment to societal functioning. In his section on “Enduring Problems of Public Opinion”, Price refers to the Enlightenment period as an era where patriotic celebrations and propagandist demonstrations were used by those in power to motivate a specific sentiment in a crowd. He writes:

Enlightenment writers, in spite of their emphasis on human reason and the progress of society through education, did not fail to grasp the non-rational, emotional aspects of public opinion… Throughout the 1700s and the 1800s, the role of general opinion as enforcer of mores and social customs, in keeping with Locke’s “law of fashion,” did not escape critical notice … The non-rational aspects of public behavior were carefully explored in the latter part of
the 19th century by writers who devoted special attention to imitative behavior and emotional “contagion” in crowds (1992: 16).

Price proceeds to outline five problems plaguing the public sphere, as realized by his studies in public opinion research: “(i) lack of competence; (ii) lack of resources; (iii) tyranny of the majority; (iv) susceptibility to persuasion; (v) domination by intellectual elites” (1992). These five motivations set to confirm that public opinion is in fact both created and maintained by a top down communication of public concerns. Such concerns are dictated by those in positions of power and conveyed to the majority through various means, including the press. Price cites the main tenets of Charles Wright Mills’s book, The Power Elite, in confirming his argument that it is the majority that is submissive to the demands and priorities of the intellectual elites in society.

In The Power Elite, Mills dissects the social strata of American society into three distinct spheres: “the first, a narrow stratum of power intellectual elite; the second, a stalemated collection of counterbalancing political forces; and the third, a large and increasingly powerless mass of citizens” (Price 1992: 21). Mills states that “in the standard image of power and decision, no force is held to be as important as The Great American Public” (1956: 20). While he argues that this public is thought to be “the seat of all legitimate power” (1956: 21), it is important to remember that The
*Power Elite* was written in 1956, during a decade that is perceived as being synonymous with submission, stratification, and structure in the United States. Mills commends the “ebb and flow” of discussion as one of the most important features of the maintenance of public opinion. But, when a society is being told which priorities are to be taken into consideration, a democratic discussion is impossible. It is primarily through the press that such influence occurs, through the stories that are pitched, prioritized, and published all with the interests of those in power taking precedent.

Condé Nast is a destination for those who seek to inject their conversations with established sound bites that are steeped in social capital. Condé Nast as a publishing house, attempts to structure the mandates’ of its magazines according to their potential influence in the following categories: politics, entertainment, sports, style, health, beauty, economy, and lifestyle. Apart from *Vanity Fair, Vogue,* and *GQ,* this publishing giant is responsible for shaping public discourse in other influential publications, such as *Gourmet, Condé Nast Traveler, Wired, Architectural Digest, Glamour, The New Yorker,* and many others. *The New Yorker* was originally part of this pilot study, however, its unique form proved to be part of a different ecological medium than the three magazines (*Vanity Fair, Vogue,* and *GQ*) used, and therefore was discarded. The three magazines that were chosen for this study were selected based on the fact that their content each month was the most representative of Condé
Nast as a whole. The totality of Condé Nast is its all-encompassing social influence, not merely its influence on food (Gourmet) or architecture (Architecture Digest). The company is a carefully organized entity that provides readers with insight into areas of society that they are convinced they need direction. Condé Nast provides the roadmap for aspiring connoisseurs to participate in a conversation, be it focused on crown moldings, canapés, or computer software, convincing them that they have become the expert on the matter, one pull quote at a time. The three magazines used in this study provide their readers with insight on subjects that other magazines under the Condé Nast umbrella have devoted their content to entirely. Vanity Fair, Vogue, and GQ provide readers with a monthly mosaic that draws on content from cultural categories that range from sports stories to style sheets to the scrutinizing of senators, all in one issue - few magazines achieve such diversity, while still providing first-rate journalism. While the content is diverse, the commonality in every article is the elite reference point that only a handful of readers can identify. Condé Nast content, regardless of the publication, moves in a direction that privileges the upwardly mobile, and magazines such as Vanity Fair, Vogue, and GQ, epitomize this movement in a manner that makes them some of the most culturally influential publications on the market.
The Economics of Persuasion – The Press v. The People

With the press being one of the main means of asserting control by the intellectual elite, it is important to consider the economics that make such a transaction possible. For Mills, a successful society, one that is conducive to public opinion, is one that mirrors that of a free economy. He writes,

[The] eighteenth-century idea of the public of public opinion parallels the economic idea of the market of the free economy. Here is the market composed of freely competing entrepreneurs; there is the public composed of discussion circles of opinion peers. As price is the result of anonymous, equally weighted, bargaining individuals, so public opinion is the result of each man’s having thought things outs for himself and contributing his voice to the great chorus. To be sure, some might have more influence on the state of opinion than others, but no one group monopolizes the discussion, or by itself determines the opinions that prevail (1956: 36).

While Mills’s utopic interpretation of a society that privileges the voices of the majority is unrecognizable in today’s societal imbalance between the producers and consumers of public priorities, the concept of ‘monopolizing’ the discussion has been granted not only to the intellectual elites of society, but to those who allow for the profitability of their ideas – advertisers.
In Ben Bagdikian’s *The Media Monopoly*, the author argues that magazine readership is often dependent on advertisers and their willingness to partner with magazines that have affluent readers. Bagdikian writes,

> Advertisers want affluent readers between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine. Magazines and broadcasting want the same audience. Magazines control their readership by sending subscription solicitations only to mailing lists that include affluent eighteen-to-forty-nine-year-old men and women (and sometimes not sending renewal notices to those in postal zones with too low a median income) (1983: 201).

At Condé Nast, advertisers play a significant role in defining and maintaining the overall appeal of the magazines that exist under the publishing house’s brand name. Consider *Vanity Fair*, whose advertisers range from *Gucci* to *Gap* to *G Coupe* by Infiniti. With such advertisements being representative of the magazine’s most desirable demographic, it is important to consider how the targeting of such a demographic influences those who consume the magazine, but not its accompanying lifestyle, as posited by the image of the magazine itself. Communication scholars Vincent Mosco and Lewis Kaye argue that the audience, or in this case the consumers of Condé Nast magazines, actively pursue media according to their social relations of class, gender and race. Mosco and Kaye state, “Audience members exist not only in
relation to the media itself, but are constituted out of the entire set of social production relations” (Mosco and Kaye 2000: 36). Therefore, the targeted consumers of the publication (be it *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, or *GQ*) become the aspirational demographic for readers who cannot achieve such social and economic status.

The late journalist-turned academic, Walter Lippmann, argues in *Public Opinion*, that an individual’s capacity to influence those around him is intrinsically related to the social strata to which he belongs. He writes,

> The size of a man’s income has considerable effect on his access to the world beyond his neighborhood. With money he can overcome almost ever tangible obstacle of communication, he can travel, buy books and periodicals, and bring with the range of his attention almost any known fact of the world. The income of the individual and the income of the community determine the amount of communication that is possible. But men’s ideas determine how that income shall be spent and that in turn affects in the long run the amount of income they will have (1922: 32).

Lippmann’s seminal work on public opinion research has been referenced by many scholars including Mills, who argues that when differentiating between those who exhibit power in society, and those who exude authority, economics is the deciding factor between the two. Mills writes, “Authority formally resides ‘in the people,’ but
power is in fact held by small circles of men. That is why the standard strategy of manipulation is to make it appear that the people, or at least a large group of them, ‘really made the decision’” (1956: 36). This form of coercion is achieved distinctly by luxury advertisers and editors alike. Both strategically align their advertisements to cater to the desires of those in the upper echelons of society, while still catering to those aspirational consumers who are seduced by the iconic brand of the magazine, and the luxury goods featured inside. According to Tom Florio, publisher of *Vogue*, the bridging of consumer desires with the magazine’s brand motivations is achieved through a strategic business model that employs consumer awareness over market research. In an article in *Advertising Age*, titled “Condé Nast helps ads do it the ‘Vogue’ way”, journalist Jim Hanas investigates Florio’s innovative marketing strategies. As Florio states,

> We started to present what we called the Vogue Capability Study. We found ourselves not only briefing but coming in with creative solutions that went beyond the magazine’s advertorial section…It wouldn’t be unusual for us to go into a presentation having completely deconstructed a client’s brand, talking about the DNA of their brand – what we felt they should leave behind and what we felt they should move forwards – and offering creative strategies to do it (Hanas 2006: 6).
In building off the desires of a community of opinion leaders, as are the readers of magazines such as *Vogue*, a distinct and coercive message can be formulated, targeting this group of alpha consumers, and those trailing behind.

Considered to be the marketing sector’s most desirable demographic, the alpha-consumers (as termed by marketers) are the influencers and pleasure-seekers of the consuming world. They are the first to know about a new product or trend; the first to try; and, the first to buy:

The term “alpha consumer” is a marketing designation that has to do with identifying the purchasing habits of the most desirable sectors of the population, usually population sectors that are known to use a large share of their disposable income to purchase desired goods and services. Alpha consumers are interested in all sorts of products, and often identified with luxury items, such as trendy clothing, fashionable restaurants, and the latest in electronic technology. (Mooij 2003: 195).

The term was first developed by professional marketer Irma Zandi in 1986. Zandi was responsible for developing the notion of ‘trend marketing’ in the 1980s (Mooij 2003: 195). According to her, alpha-consumers are divided into two influential groups – teenagers and baby boomers: “Alpha consumers exert their influence by exposing friends, relatives, and acquaintances to the latest trends, and by using the products in
such a way that other people tend to see the goods and services as worth the time and price” (Mooij 2003: 196). Alpha consumers take many shapes – common to all is that they are primarily grounded with a high disposable income and all the cachets that accompany such status. While Zandi argues that alpha consumers are primarily teenagers and baby boomers, it can be argued that in fact other sectors of the population are adopting the same label. With baby boomers starting to retire, a new demographic of consumers is emerging – where disposable income is being used to acquire the latest Callaway driver and coastal cottage. Another new demographic is the Generation X, a group of consumers who after having graduated from college, have moved back home, and are living a lifestyle free of rent and responsibilities, thus leaving them with disposable income to use on iphones and Infinitis. Regardless of the change in composition of the alpha consumer, the constant over the years is the influence that these demographics have over marketers, and the masses.

Consider the *Vanity Fair* reader – a college-educated individual who traditionally lives in a household with a six-figure income. According to many market researchers, one alpha consumer is equivalent to five regular consumers (Mooij 2003: 196). Therefore, it is evident that the quintessential *Vanity Fair* reader has almost as much clout with regard to what is considered cool, as do the journalists who write for the magazine, establishing trends and talking points from which the alpha consumer
can choose. In examining the influential power of the alpha consumer, specifically a
*Vanity Fair* reader epitomizing this consumer demographic, it can be argued that the
ideas represented by the magazine will be both read and redistributed by their readers
to the point that *Vanity Fair* content will in fact be available to a larger demographic
than the magazine originally intended. This phenomenon of the movers and shakers
influencing peer groups is a trend that was first realized by social scientists during the
1940 U.S. Presidential campaign, and interestingly enough, the trend is only growing
stronger today.

Paul Lazarfeld’s ‘two-step’ flow theory emerged following an experiment on
political election messages affecting the attitudes of the electorate during the 1940
Presidential campaign. Lazarsfeld realized that it was not media exposure to such
messages that correlated with the voters’ choice, but instead peer group partisanship
which influenced voter choice (1948). In Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillman’s book,
*Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, the authors reference Paul
Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet’s study that provided further
understanding of the influence of peer groups: “Some researchers argued that when
public attitude change was produced, it was only indirectly attributable to the media.
That is, the media were more effective in influencing various opinion leaders than the
average person, and these opinion leaders were responsible for changes in the mass
public (i.e. ‘a two-step’ flow of communication”) (Petty et al. 2002: 159). Termed The People’s Choice, Lazarsfeld et al.’s study, published in 1948, provided key insight into the media-audience relationship. In examining the 1940 Presidential campaign, the authors noted that voters appear to receive information about a specific candidate from ‘opinion leaders’ within their community: “The study suggested that communication from the mass media first reaches "opinion leaders" who filter the information they gather to their associates, with whom they are influential. Previous theories assumed that media directly reached the target of the information” (Petty et al. 2002: 159). Lazarsfeld et al. suggested that, "ideas often flow from radio and print to the opinion leaders and from them to the less active sections of the population. People tend to be much more affected in their decision making process by face-to-face encounters with influential peers than by the mass media” (Lazarsfeld et al. 1961: 430), it is important to note that with face-to-face interaction becoming more infrequent in today’s society, the influence of reputable and reliable individuals (i.e. journalists), has taken the place of many face-to-face conversations. With the average American voter spending more time on his or her blackberry than at the breakfast table with his or her family, the influence of authoritative voices/perspectives is greater than in earlier decades, given the quantity of media messages, which according to numerous reports, number over 3,000 per day for the average American (Mooij 2003: 20).
According to Lazarsfeld et al., ‘opinion leaders’ in the 1940s could be deemed experts in the field in which they were both referencing and influencing:

The traits that characterize each of the opinion leaders in their niche did have things in common, though. For one thing, the opinion leaders were identified as having the strongest interest in their particular niche. They hold positions within their community affording them special competence in their particular niches. They are generally gregarious, sociable individuals. Finally, they had/have contact with relevant information supplied from outside their immediate circle. Interestingly enough, it was observed that the opinion leaders receive a disproportionate amount of their external information from media appropriate to their niche (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948: 67).

Lippmann would argue in fact that these individuals are able to exert the greatest influence because they often occupy the role of acquaintance within a given community. He writes,

The highest social set consists of those who embody the leadership of the Great Society. As against almost every other social set where the bulk of the opinions are first hand only about local affairs, in this Highest Society the big decisions of war and peace, of social strategy and the ultimate distribution of political
power, are intimate experiences within a circle of what, potentially at least, are personal acquaintances (1922: 36).

While Lippmann published *Public Opinion* in 1922 and Lazarsfeld’s study referenced the 1940 Presidential election, today, ‘opinion leaders’ can be compared to ‘alpha-consumers’. As previously stated, the alpha-consumer is the influencer in today’s consumer society. Therefore whatever practice or trend an alpha consumer responds to, it is likely that many individuals who interact with such a consumer will consequently adopt similar, if not identical, views.

Social scientist Robert Merton, author of *Social Theory and Social Structure*, argues that within a specific niche, an opinion leader is often the expert at large, whereas in a completely separate milieu, the same individual may occupy a lesser role: “Opinion leadership is not a general characteristic of a person, but rather limited to specific issues. Individuals who act as opinion leaders on one issue, may not be considered influencers in regard to other issues” (Merton 1949: 100). The expertise of *Vanity Fair* journalists on specific subjects such as politics, current events, and celebrity culture, makes them opinion leaders and gives them a significant influence on readers who consider their articles as representing their own perspective on the matter. Therefore a distinct formula of influence emerges with Condé Nast readers often adopting the influencer role from their previous role as influencee, and disseminating
their theory regarding a given subject to those in their community. Accordingly the voices of Graydon Carter, Jim Nelson, and Anna Wintour are injected into the greater population of individuals attempting to learn about the subject at hand. As Lippmann states, “It would seem from this that there exists a body of known truth, and a set of well founded hopes, which are prostituted by a more or less conscious conspiracy of the rich owners of newspapers,” (1922: 212). Instead of rich newspaper owners, consider influential magazine editors, propagating their version of the truth to readers. As Merton suggests, “opinion leaders do not replace the media, but guide discussions of the media” (1949: 135). Therefore, with Condé Nast journalists framing their articles according to a specific political perspective, they have chosen a particular storyline to present to readers who subsequently take such a message and disseminate it to the masses (see Model 2.1).

**Model 2.1 – Tracking Their Message: From the Editor to “Everyone Else”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ELITE</th>
<th>PUBLIC</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Movers and Shakers”</td>
<td>“Consumers”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condé Nast Editors</td>
<td>Condé Nast Subscribers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graydon Carter</td>
<td>Anna Wintour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna Wintour</td>
<td>Jim Nelson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writer</td>
<td>Community Opinion Leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher Hitchens</td>
<td>Plum Sykes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Subscribers”</td>
<td>The Masses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Alpha Consumer”</td>
<td>Condé Nast Subscribers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles Bowden</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

It can be argued that there exist two-tiers for both the elite and the public. Within the elite structure, there is a division between the editor of the magazine and the journalist...
writing for the editor (considered the ‘public intellectual’). Individuals within this structure are considered active participants, both creating and crafting a given narrative to present to subscribers. The perceived cultural credibility of this conduit is crucial for the transmission of the magazines’ messages. The manner in which the public receives said message is dependent on the two-tiered structure that has emerged, separating influential members of the public (i.e. alpha consumers, opinion leaders, and Condé Nast Subscribers) and the masses. The influential members of the public actively seek the messages from the cultural “movers and shakers”, while the masses passively accept that which is presented to them by the “subscribers”. In analyzing the active to passive continuum, it is illustrated that once members of the public, (specifically the alpha consumers/opinion leaders), accept the magazines’ messages, the public becomes a passive entity that willingly accepts the presented information. Consequently, the opinions of the public are based on the priorities of the elite and thus, public discourse becomes a series of carefully constructed narratives that is maintained by those who are anything but, public.

**Consider the Source: Persuasion and the Intellect**

With both Price and Mills referencing the bygone days of public discussion in the coffee shops, at the town hall, and even during democratic occurrences such as elections, it is important to consider the role of society’s *intelligentsia* in defining that
which is considered of importance. Noam Chomsky, a linguist and communication scholar, argues that the notion of the ‘public intellectual’ is deeply rooted in the basic democratic premise that reasoning and freedom of expression are the pillars of public function:

The role and practices of the public intellectual presuppose certain values and conditions that would seem to be integral to the possibility of free intellectual activity, however imperfectly realized. Such values and conditions as freedom of speech and thought; preservation from the corrupting influence or coercion of private or public power; the triumph of reason and discussion over force, for example (1969: 93).

In American Power and the New Mandarins, Chomsky argues that there exist two roles that the “public intellectual” plays in society – “the social and political critic” and “the secular priest” (1969). Chomsky’s “the social and political critic” is more easily understood as the public intellectual itself. Rooted in Enlightenment thought, the public intellectual is “concerned with a defense of ideas of progress, justice and freedom through the spread of rational knowledge and the critical questioning of tradition, habit and custom” (Wilkin 1997: 90). Wilkin argues that Chomsky’s dividing roles can more clearly be defined as “the public intellectual” and “the ironist”. For Wilkin, “the ironist” category is used in the capacity that it “mirrors debates about the possibility of
a naturalist approach to the social sciences” (1997: 95). He argues that if a public intellectual were more ‘ironist’ inclined, he/she would consider the role of social and natural pressures in terms of whether a given story or event should be challenged: “The public intellectual with the expressed ideal of challenging orthodoxy and illegitimate forms of power and authority becomes an anachronism, assuming as they do that the idea of transcendent analysis and explanation of events is a viable goal for both natural and social inquiry” (Wilkin 1997: 96).

In End Times: The Death of the Fourth Estate, authors Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair include a transcript between Cockburn and Ian Parker, a journalist with The New Yorker, regarding renowned journalist and at times, public intellectual, Christopher Hitchens and his reputation in the journalistic community. Cockburn writes,

I suppose I met him [Hitchens] in the early 1980s and all the long-term political and indeed personal traits were visible enough. I never thought of him as at all radical. In basic philosophical take he has always seemed to me to hold as his central premise a profound belief in the therapeutic properties of capitalism and empire. He was an instinctive flagwagger and has remained so today (2007: 313).
Christopher Hitchens has written for such publications as Newsweek, Slate, The New York Times, The Atlantic, The Wall Street Journal, USA Today, The Nation, and Vanity Fair. Some of his most intriguing pieces have been published in Vanity Fair. Such pieces include him having undergone a fitness makeover, had a bikini wax, and been water-boarded, “[all] for the sake of journalistic accuracy” (2007), he claimed.

Hitchens is also the author of numerous books, including, The Missionary Position (Verso, 1994), No One Left to Lie To (Verso, 1999), The Trial of Henry Kissinger (Verso, 2001), Letters to a Young Contrarian (Basic Books, 2001), and Why Orwell Matters (Basic Books, 2002). Always controversial, Hitchens has over the years challenged the status-quo and stood up for what he believed, even if the publications he wrote for disagreed with his stance.

In November 2004, Hitchens wrote an article in Vanity Fair about the importance of Americans fighting in Iraq to restore democracy in a country that had been crippled for far too long by a corrupt dictator. It is important to note that Graydon Carter, Vanity Fair’s Editor-in-Chief was one of the first editors to speak out against the war, yet still published Hitchens’ pro-war effort piece. Hitchens’ article, which argued that a country that has so much to offer the world, should follow through on its promises, struck a chord with a young UCLA graduate by the name of Mark Jennings Daily. The Irvine, California native enlisted after reading Hitchens’ passionate and
patriotic plea. In the November 2007 issue of *Vanity Fair*, Hitchens wrote an emotional personal narrative responding to the realization that through the power of his pen he managed to convince a twenty-two year old man to enlist in the Army, and that young man was tragically killed by enemy fire.

Hitchens first read about his effect on Daily in an article in the *Los Angeles Times*. Written by journalist Teresa Watanabe, the article cited Hitchen’s *Vanity Fair* article as a form of persuasion for Americans, like Daily, to consider their role in Iraq. Watanabe wrote, “Somewhere along the way, he [Daily] changed his mind. His family says there was no epiphany. Writings by author and columnist Christopher Hitchens on the moral case for war deeply influenced him (latimes.com/feb16/2008).” Hitchens wrote about how after feeling obliged to contact Daily’s family to offer his condolences, he learned that Daily, a Democrat and anti-war American, felt compelled to fight in the Middle East after an article in *Vanity Fair* told him to do so. Hitchens wrote,

> In a way, the story was almost too perfect: this handsome lad had been born on the Fourth of July, was a registered Democrat and self-described agnostic, a U.C.L.A. honors graduate, and during his college days had fairly decided reservations about the war in Iraq. I feverishly clicked on all the links from the article and found myself on Lieutenant Daily's MySpace site, where his
"Why I Joined" was posted. The site also immediately kicked into a skirling noise of Irish revolutionary pugnacity: a song from the Dropkick Murphys album Warrior's Code. And there, at the top of the page, was a link to a passage from one of my articles, in which I poured scorn on those who were neutral about the battle for Iraq … I don't remember ever feeling, in every allowable sense of the word, quite so hollow (November 2007).

His article continued in a gut-wrenching response, to acknowledge that among all the articles he has written, it was one on war that resulted in the death of a young and innocent soldier. Deviating from his pro-war roots, Hitchens’ article focused not only on the loss of a heroic man, but he also attempted to understand why American soldiers were being killed in such inordinate numbers and yet more troops were still being sent. He wrote,

So, was Mark Daily killed by the Ba'thist and bin Ladenist riffraff who place bombs where they will do the most harm? Or by the Rumsfeld doctrine, which sent American soldiers to Iraq in insufficient numbers and with inadequate equipment? Or by the Bush administration, which thought Iraq would be easily pacified? Or by the previous Bush administration, which left Saddam Hussein in power in 1991 and fatally postponed the time of reckoning? (November 2007).
The theme of causation is one that Hitchens examines in nearly every piece he has written for *Vanity Fair*, since he first started at the magazine in 1992. In examining three of his most popular articles on the *Vanity Fair* website, the heart of every Hitchens article is the question of ‘why is this what we have come to?’

Hollywood starlets Blake Lively, Emma Roberts, Kristen Stewart and Amanda Seyfried graced *Vanity Fair*’s August 2008 ‘Hollywood New Wave’ issue. The issue posited itself as an ode to ingénues from “Gossip Girls” to “Superbad Boys”. Young and sexy celebutants were handpicked and deemed the next generation of Hollywood movers and shakers. After pages of interviews with young stars about whether they preferred blackberry or iphone, mocha or latte, boxers or briefs, Hitchens’s latest questioning of American logic – waterboarding - appeared.

He wrote,

I passed one of the most dramatic evenings of my life listening to his cold but enraged denunciation of the adoption of waterboarding by the United States. The argument goes like this: (1) Waterboarding is a deliberate torture technique and has been prosecuted as such by our judicial arm when perpetrated by others. (2) If we allow it and justify it, we cannot complain if it is employed in the future by other regimes on captive U.S. citizens. It is a method of putting American prisoners in harm’s way. (3) It may be a means of extracting
information, but it is also a means of extracting junk information. (Mr. Nance told me that he had heard of someone’s being compelled to confess that he was a hermaphrodite. I later had an awful twinge while wondering if I myself could have been “dunked” this far.) To put it briefly, even the C.I.A. sources for the *Washington Post* story on waterboarding conceded that the information they got out of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was “not all of it reliable.” Just put a pencil line under that last phrase, or commit it to memory. (4) It opens a door that cannot be closed. Once you have posed the notorious “ticking bomb” question, and once you assume that you are in the right, what will you not do? Waterboarding not getting results fast enough? The terrorist’s clock still ticking? Well, then, bring on the thumbscrews and the pincers and the electrodes and the rack (August 2008).

For a man who initially supported the removal of Saddam Hussein at any cost, Hitchens’ ideals have shifted – not by government officials or fellow opinion leaders, but ironically, by a consumer who both lived and died according to the world of Christopher Hitchens.

In considering Chomsky’s notion of the “public intellectual,” Hitchens appears to have, through his waterboarding investigation, abided by Chomsky’s tenets of questioning authority and educating the masses: “intellectuals are in a position to
expose the lies of government, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives
and often hidden intentions. In the western world at least, they have the power that
comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression”
(1969: 89). Hitchens’ investigation was published nine months after he received news
about Daily’s death in Iraq and the reason why he enlisted. One could argue that
following Hitchens’ revelation about his influential pro-war article and its conservative
sensibilities, he decided to reexamine the power of the pen, reclaiming his journalistic
autonomy. By undergoing the waterboarding torture, Hitchens was reintroduced to his
responsibility as a public intellectual. As Wilkin argues, social and political
consciousness contributes to many intellectuals understanding their role in society:

There are substantive reasons to argue that intellectuals do indeed have
particular responsibilities that relate to the power that their position in modern
societies brings them. How they view those responsibilities will no doubt be
shaped in part by their own social and political consciousness and in part by
how they perceive their relationship to the institutions of power in society

However, is Hitchens rediscovering his role as a public intellectual in society, or is he
merely acting as a modern ironist, attempting to dismantle the status quo in a manner
that does not challenge authority, but instead reinforces his own position of power? As
Lippmann states, “…the power of the expert demands upon separating himself from those who make the decisions, upon not caring, in his expert self, what decision is made… For when he begins to care too much, he begins to see what he wishes to see, and by that fact ceases to see what he is there to see. He is there to represent the unseen” (1922: 241).

A Fine Balance: The Public vs. The Intellectual Elite

While both Price and Chomsky argued that public opinion is often originally defined by the intellectual elite in order to manipulate the masses’ understanding of the rudimentary ideals of a democracy, there are such scholars who believe that the term stems initially from the public to the private, rather than vice versa. Public opinion researcher Daniel Yankelovich argues that by coining the term ‘public opinion’, the degree to which the public’s perspective is taken into account is, more often than not, compromised. He states,

I will use the term ‘public judgment’ to mean a particular form of public opinion that exhibits (1) more thoughtfulness, more weighing of alternatives, more genuine engagement with the issue, more taking into account a wide variety of factors than ordinary public opinion as measured in opinion polls, and (2) more emphasis on the normative, valuing, ethical side of questions than on the factual, informational side (1991: 5).
Yankelovich sees the development of ‘public judgment’ as resonating from an all-encompassing understanding by the public – specifically, he argues that it is “the state of highly developed public opinion that exists once people have engaged an issue, considered it from all sides, understood the choices it leads to, and accepted the full consequences of the choices they make” (1991: 6). In his book, *Coming to Public Judgment*, Yankelovich attests that philosophy’s basic framework has allowed for the concept of empiricism to emerge as one of the key factors that lend itself to understanding the power of intellectual credibility in shaping public judgment.

Surprisingly though, Yankelovich’s studies have illustrated that there is a top-down infrastructure in which there exists a gap between those deemed ‘experts’ in society, and those considered to be the ‘public’. Yankelovich sees a clear separation between “those who ‘serve’ the public, and the public itself” (1991: 4). The author has termed this gap, “the culture of technical control”, whereby a balance of influence and impressions must be reached:

In present day America, a serious gap exists between the point of view of the experts and that of the general public. The gap is wide and deep, it covers not only differences in levels of knowledge but also in values, frameworks and modes of expression (1991: 92).
In order to support his theory, Yankelovich referred to three case studies that demonstrate that the use of expert opinion consequently altered any potential resolution that could have been achieved had the best interest of the public been taken into consideration.

The first case study introduces readers to the notion of “the Greenhouse Effect”, an early 1990s phenomenon that convinced the public that environmental threats could be traced to vehicle emissions and factory pollutants. While there are many scientists who argue that there are numerous reasons for the depletion of the ozone, Yankelovich argues that it was a combination of the misuse of semantics and experts’ differing opinions, that led to public confusion about the issue.

Yankelovich’s second case study examines the overcrowding of prisons in the United States. For him, it is a quintessential illustration of the gap between experts and the public in terms of their “point of departure” (1991: 93). Yankelovich cites a study conducted by the Public Agenda Foundation in Alabama, whereby participants were shown a video that “dramatized the ills resulting from prison overcrowding” (1991: 94). According to the study, experts assumed that the public would agree with the courts that “[prison overcrowding], is cruel and unusual punishment” (1991: 94). Yankelovich stated that, “[most intellectual elites] assumed that the pubic would concur with this conclusion if public education graphically demonstrated the negative
effects of overcrowding” (1991: 94). Participants were polled both before and after viewing a public education film about the effects of prison overcrowding on prisoners. The results of the study illustrated that “the majority rejected the expert’s premise both before and after being exposed to the public education campaign” (1991: 94). The experts who were referred to for this issue did not consider the high credibility that the state prison system has on American citizens. As Yankelovich stated,

[Americans] are severely critical of the criminal justice system as being too lenient and as biased in favor of the criminal and against the victim. If, in the consciousness raising that accompanies the crime issue, emphasis is placed on strategies that strike Americans as continuing to show more concern for the criminal than the victim (building more prisons to reduce overcrowding), most Americans will simply block out the message. It so lacks credibility that it deflects people from the task of engaging the hard choices involved in combating crime and drugs. It arrests people at the level if mass opinion, stopping thought that might address the crime issue more productively (1991: 95).

The author’s understanding of the public’s perception of crime, combined with the intellectual elites’ assumptions that the masses would accept the status-quo, confirms Price’s notion that the “domination by intellectual elites” does in fact plague public
opinion. As Price argued, “A continuing cause for concern about public opinion in modern democracies focuses on … ‘the domestication of mass belief’ … the American population [has been] transformed by the mass media into a market that consumes, rather than a public that produces, ideas and opinions” (1991: 21). If a public is not representational of the priorities and interests of its member can it still be considered a public? Or, is it merely an entity to disseminate the ideals of those in power?

Yankelovich’s third case study addresses the issue of “freedom of expression”. He highlights the age-old distinction between the producers and consumer of news and how this relationship influences the positioning of a news event/story. Yankelovich argues that it is the rhetoric associated with the term “freedom of expression” that confuses both journalists and the public alike. He states,

The biggest gap between the press and the public is on the very definition of what freedom of the press means. The public’s clear understanding of what freedom of the press means to it is misunderstood by journalists. [Average Americans] see themselves as consumers, viewers, and listeners; their concern is access to information, not their ability to voice their views freely… When opinion polls report that the public desires greater regulation of the media, there is a built-in misunderstanding. Experts and journalists automatically assume
that the public is calling for censorship of unpopular ideas, and the press
The discrepancies that exist between both producers and consumers of news are ones
that are rarely discussed by public opinion researchers. It is assumed that what is
presented by journalists is taken at face value by the public (i.e. the consumers). This
however, is not the case. A variety of factors play a role in a reader’s understanding of
a given news article. Be it focused on politics, fashion, health, culture, or business, a
news item is never processed by readers in the same manner as intended by its
producers. Or, is it? The next chapter will examine the process through which Condé
Nast consumers interpret the information presented in *Vanity Fair, Vogue,* and *GQ.*
Chapter 3. Methodology

“Opinion is the medium between knowledge and ignorance.”

Plato

A Consensus: Measuring Public Opinion

In order to effectively measure the public’s perception of cultural magazines’ opinion leadership, it is essential that a multi-method approach be applied. In this chapter I will discuss the methodological approaches that I used to illustrate the manner in which public opinion is both created and maintained by cultural magazines, such as Vanity Fair, Vogue, and GQ. According to Price, public opinion can be measured using five techniques, which range from critiquing the content of the opinion being expressed, to interviewing those who stated the opinion, to surveying the interpretation of the opinions by the public. Price writes,

Indicators of public opinion are drawn from many sources, generally through one of three techniques: structured interviews, gathering self-reports by individuals, groups, or organizations (mainly used in representative sample surveys but also in experimental settings); content analyses of political platforms, organizational memoranda, private correspondence, or news and editorials; in-depth interviews or relatively unstructured group discussions with public officials, organizational intellectual elites, activists, or focus groups (1992: 84).
Price also notes that there are unconventional means of measuring public opinion which stem primarily from cultural studies. He suggests that researchers interested in a more interpretive method, should resort to focus groups and in-depth interviews. He writes, “Public opinion researchers have also taken a more interpretive approach to media content analysis, to gain insight into the way media frame the terms of public debate…The more interpretive and qualitative procedures are used as supplements rather than as alternatives to more structured techniques” (1992: 88). In order to demonstrate the discrepancies that exist between both producers and consumers of news, it was imperative that a multi-method approach that employs both quantitative and qualitative research properties be applied.

**Chronicling Consumption: The Mass Market Magazine Survey**

A convenience sample survey was employed in this pilot study as a means to measure the magazine consumption habits of the public. The survey, titled, “Measuring Magazine Habits – Readership and Consumption Practices”, was divided into four sections – (i) “Magazine Purchasing Habits”; (ii) “Magazine Reading Habits”; (iii) “Consider Yourself, and Magazines”; (iv) “Consumer Report”. The survey, which was in the field for five weeks (from January 26, 2009 to February 24, 2009), was composed of eighteen questions overall. The survey was designed and distributed using an online survey tool, Survey Monkey.
The first section of the survey asked respondents about their magazine subscription and/or purchasing habits. The magazines that the participants could choose from were *Time, People, Vanity Fair, Vogue,* and *GQ.* Participants were also able to list other magazines which were not mentioned above. In order to gauge the reason why participants subscribe to such magazines, respondents were asked “what is the reasoning behind your subscription?” Reasons listed included, ‘political news’, ‘celebrity news’, ‘style trends’, ‘world events’, ‘reputation of the magazine’, and ‘association with the magazine’. The second section of the survey sought to measure the reading habits of respondents. A series of six questions asked “how often do you read each of the following magazines (*Vanity Fair, GQ,* and *Vogue*)?” Questions were also asked about respondents’ news consumption habits – whether they read a daily print newspaper, a local newspaper, and online news. The third section of the survey focused on more specific questions concerning public opinion. The three questions in this section were as follows:

- During the 2008 Presidential Election, did you seek information about candidates through non-traditional forms of journalism (e.g. tabloid newspapers, celebrity magazines, political blogs, cultural magazines [*Vanity Fair, GQ, Vogue*]);
- If yes, which of the aforementioned mediums;
• How often do you think Americans consume each of the following types of journalism on a monthly basis? (Forms: tabloid journalism, fashion, beauty and health magazines, and national newspapers).

The final section of the survey focused on the demographics of the respondents. Respondents were asked their age, and their highest education level. While other demographic questions could have been asked, such as gender, race, socio-economic status, etc., the purpose of this study is to illustrate the correlation between the public discourse created and maintained by intellectual elites and the public discourse understood by the masses. Therefore, I would argue that the only two factors that would influence respondents’ consumption of magazine journalism, and therefore their understanding of public events, would be their age - a factor beyond their control – and, their education status, a factor indicative of their ability to process news events and opinion.

The survey employed a convenience sample. A recruitment email was distributed to students in the Communication, Culture and Technology graduate program at Georgetown University, as well as undergraduate students in the American Studies program. The survey was also posted on a Georgetown alumni website. After the survey was in the field for five weeks, it was removed and converted from its spreadsheet to SPSS, a statistical analysis program. While there were 103 respondents,
a caveat of the sample is that approximately 85% of respondents were graduate students. More specifically, respondents were primarily in their early-to-mid twenties. As a result, the distinct consumption habits that are traditionally associated with such a demographic, such as a low-income for students, or a high disposable income for young professionals, must be taken into consideration.

It is for this reason that it was essential that an open discussion concerning a respondent’s understanding of the material featured in cultural magazines take place in the form of a focus group. As Price argues, “The trade-offs between highly structured question asking – with definitive, predetermined response categories – and more flexible interviews – leaving the framing of answers, and questions, up to the respondent – have been recognized in public opinion research for many years” (1992: 88). Therefore, in order to analyze the overall messages that are being disseminated to the public through content, images, and advertisements in magazines such as Vanity Fair, Vogue, and GQ, the focus group research format is essential for analyzing the role of spectators in this consumption transaction.

**From an Observational Standpoint - Focus Groups**

In *Public Opinion*, Price argues that while the use of focus groups tends to limit participant diversity, participants’ willingness to express their opinions on a given subject is more readily available. This compensation adds to the richness of public
opinion research when analyzing popular culture materials. The focus group structure employed in this pilot study made it possible to decipher the thought process of participants and the manner in which they interpreted the covers of the *Vanity Fair*, *GQ*, and *Vogue*. Termed the Brooks Magazine Consumption Method, participants’ findings were evaluated according to their interpretation of the covers of selected issues of *Vanity Fair*, *GQ*, and *Vogue*.

The format of the focus groups was based on a constructivist methodology that relied on the participants’ pre-existing schemas about the magazines that they were asked to analyze. The participants were selected based on availability and were recruited through posters that appeared on Georgetown University’s campus and through the Georgetown University’s Communication, Culture and Technology program electronic mailing list. Recruitment materials stated that pizza would be served at the one-hour long focus group. The four homogeneous groups that were assembled consisted primarily of Georgetown University graduate and undergraduate students, and a faculty member. Based on the participants’ availability, four groups were formed, each representative of one of the four magazines (*Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *GQ*) that would be used for analysis. The participants were not informed which group they were in until they arrived at the focus group. Each focus group participant was required to complete an informed consent form which stated that,
“[The participant] has been asked to participate in a research study to investigate how cultural journalists have become opinion leaders in a variety of fields through the credibility of their publications and how this is shaping public opinion for the masses. Specifically, my study focuses on magazines including, *Vanity Fair, Vogue,* and *GQ*”.

The first focus group took place on a Friday afternoon at 1:00 p.m. to address perceptions of *Vogue* magazine.

**Deciphering a *Vogue* Reality:**

Upon arrival, participants were welcomed by myself, the researcher and facilitator of the focus group, and seated in a medium-sized conference room, where they were handed a consent form and offered pizza. At the beginning of each focus group, regardless of the publication in question, participants were asked to complete a survey about specific facts pertaining to both the magazine itself and the perceived reader demographic. Questions were read aloud by the facilitator, while participants continued to consume the pizza, fostering an informal and comfortable setting. The first questions pertained to the magazine. The questions appeared on paper and were read by the facilitator. Participants were urged not to respond to the next question until notified to do so. Questions about *Vogue* consisted of the following:

- Who do you think is the Editor-in-Chief of *Vogue*?
• Who is on this month’s (February) cover of *Vogue*?
• Who will be on next month’s (March) cover of *Vogue*?
• What was the name of the film that depicted *Vogue* magazine and its Editor-in-Chief?
• Which sells more magazines - subscriptions or newsstands?

All participants were told that regardless of whether they knew the correct answer, they were required to provide an answer to each question. Participants were then instructed to follow the same procedure and asked to complete a survey about what they perceived as the intended *Vogue* reader. The questions were,

• What do you think is the median age of the *Vogue* reader?
• What do you think is the ratio (percentage) of female to male readers?
• Do you read *Vogue*?
• Do you know of anyone who reads *Vogue* regularly (i.e. once every couple of months)?
• If so, what is your relation to this person?

After collecting the responses, an open discussion about the participants’ impressions of the magazine began. As Price states, “Open-ended questioning in focus groups can help the investigator understand the thought processes used to arrive at opinions”
In order to facilitate discussion, I asked participants the following questions:

- What comes to mind when you think about *Vogue* magazine?
- What are some of your impressions?
- What kind of content do you expect to find in an issue?
- If you were to read an issue of *Vogue*, what components of the magazine would your trust (i.e. trends, style, health, politics)?
- Who do you think is privileged in the magazine?

Following the discussion, participants viewed a three-minute promotional video produced by *Vogue*, about the ‘behind-the-scenes’ of the magazine’s April 2008 “Body Issue”. The video featured supermodel Gisele Bundchen and basketball star LeBron James being photographed for the cover of the issue. Following the film, participants were asked the following questions: “(1) What are your impressions of the film? (2) What are some of the components of the film that show credibility? (3) Did you find the video controversial?” A lively discussion ensued as participants commented on the magazine’s juxtaposition of waifish female models and highly-toned male athletes. For the remainder of the hour long focus group, participants were presented with a series of *Vogue* magazine covers. The covers appeared one at a time on an overhead screen. The six covers used were selected based on the initial selection of the April 2008 “Body
Issue”. This issue received negative media attention for its controversial depiction of a female model (Gisele Bundchen) being towered over by a dominant African-American athlete (LeBron James). Given that this image appeared on the April cover, the three covers that appeared prior to its publication (January 2008, February 2008, and March 2008) were selected, as were the two months that followed (May 2008 and June 2008).

Each cover appeared on the screen, one at a time, for five minutes. Participants were asked to express their initial reaction to the image. Participants were then asked a series of questions, one at a time. The following questions were asked of the participants, in relation to their understanding of each of the cover images that were presented:

- What is your first impression of the cover?
- Who is privileged?
- By reading the headlines, what are some of the themes in the issue?
- Who do you think this issue is being targeted at?

Following the discussion, all six covers appeared on the screen and participants were asked to select which issue they would have purchased. Each participant was instructed not to give a reason for their selection, but to merely state based on the numeric order of the issues, which number they would have purchased between January and June 2008.
Reading Between the Lines of *GQ*:

The Brooks Magazine Consumption Method was employed in the same manner as it was for the focus group for *Vogue* magazine. Participants were initially asked to complete a survey on their understanding of *GQ* magazine. The survey that participants were asked to complete upon their arrival consisted of the following questions:

- What does ‘*GQ*’ stand for?
- Who do you think is the Editor-in-Chief of *GQ*?
- Who is on this month’s (February) cover of *GQ*?
- Who will be on next month’s (March) cover of *GQ*?
- Who did *GQ* name as ‘Woman of the Year’ for 2008?
- Which sells more magazines – subscriptions or newsstands?

Participants were then asked to complete a survey pertaining to their perception of the intended *GQ* reader. The questions were of the following:

- What do you think is the median age of the *GQ* reader?
- What do you think is the median household income of the *GQ* reader?
- What do you think is the ratio (percentage) of male to female readers?
- Do you read *GQ*?
- Do you know anyone who reads *GQ* (i.e. once every couple of months)?
- If so, what is your relation to this person?
After collecting the responses, an open discussion about the participants’ impressions of the magazine began. In order to facilitate discussion, I asked participants the following questions:

- What comes to mind when you think about *GQ* magazine? What are some of your impressions?
- What kind of content do you expect to find in an issue?
- If you were to read an issue of *GQ*, what components of the magazine would your trust (i.e. trends, style, health, politics)?
- Who do you think is privileged in the magazine?

Following the discussion, participants viewed a three-minute promotional video produced by *GQ*, about the ‘behind-the-scenes’ of the magazine’s November 2008 “Election Issue”. The video featured late-night talk show host, Jimmy Kimmel, dressed as former American Presidents. Kimmel was dressed in the appropriate wardrobe to channel the stereotypical looks of President Washington, Kennedy, Nixon, and Bush, to name a few. Following the film, participants were asked the following questions: “(1) What are your impressions of the film? (2) What are some of the components of the film that show credibility? (3) Did you find the video controversial?”

In order to measure the source credibility of *GQ* in the eyes of the focus group participants, the covers that were chosen to be analyzed were based on the magazine’s
self-selected “Best of the Beltway” top political stories. GQ’s website (www.men.style.com/gq) listed 73 political stories that have been featured in the magazine since 2004. I chose the ten most recent articles and paired them with the cover photo of the issue. Participants were told about the political story that was in the issue, and then were shown the cover photograph. This manipulation was designed to influence the direction of participants’ thoughts. The first cover was the March 2008 “10 Most Stylish Men in America” issue which featured a well-dressed Justin Timberlake. According to GQ.com, the March 2008 issue featured an in-depth history of Arlington National Cemetery:

They call it the Garden, our national shrine, Arlington National Cemetery – and even now, on the sixth anniversary of the war in Iraq, the bodies keep coming in, thirty a day. For the men who do the burying, who actually touch the grief, grave digging is more than a job. It’s a way of reckoning with who we are now as a country (Paterniti: March 2008).

None of the headlines on the March 2008 cover made any reference to this political article. This was a trend that occurred for every issue that was used for the focus group analysis. I intentionally chose to evaluate whether participants would be interested in the magazine based on the magazine’s cover, or the promised political article that was featured inside. The issues used in the focus groups were (in order) March 2009,

Each cover appeared on the screen, one at a time, for five minutes. Participants were asked to express their initial reaction to the image. Participants were then asked a series of questions, one at a time. The following questions were asked of the participants, in relation to their understanding of the cover image that was presented:

- What is your first impression of the cover?
- Who is privileged?
- By reading the headlines, what are some of the themes in the issue?
- Who do you think this issue is being targeted to?

For each cover, participants were asked whether they would have purchased the specific issue and whether their selection was based on the cover photograph and headlines or based on the aforementioned political article.

**The Verification of *Vanity Fair***:

The Brooks Magazine Consumption Method was employed in the same manner as it was for the focus group for *Vogue* and *GQ*. Participants were initially asked to complete a survey on their understanding of *Vanity Fair* magazine. The survey that participants were asked to complete upon their arrival consisted of the following questions:
• Who is the Editor-in-Chief of *Vanity Fair*?

• Who is on this month’s (March) cover of *Vanity Fair*?

• Who will be on next month’s (April) cover of *Vanity Fair*?

• What was the title of the book/upcoming movie that was written by a former assistant to the Editor-in-Chief about his experiences at *Vanity Fair*?

• Which sells more magazines – subscriptions or newsstands?

Participants were then asked to complete a survey pertaining to their perception of the intended *Vanity Fair* reader. The questions were of the following:

• What do you think is the median age of the *Vanity Fair* reader?

• What do you think is the median household income?

• What do you think is the ratio (percentage) of male to female readers?

• Do you read *Vanity Fair*?

• Do you know anyone who reads *Vanity Fair* (i.e. once every couple of months)?

• If so, what is your relation to this person?

After collecting the responses, an open discussion about the participants’ impressions of the magazine began. In order to facilitate discussion, I asked participants the following questions:
• What comes to mind when you think about *Vanity Fair* magazine?

• What are some of your impressions?

• What kind of content do you expect to find in an issue?

• If you were to read an issue of *Vanity Fair*, what components of the magazine would your trust (i.e. trends, style, health, politics)?

• Who do you think is privileged in the magazine?

Following the discussion, participants viewed a three-minute promotional video produced by *Vanity Fair*, about the ‘behind-the-scenes’ of the magazine’s April 2008 “Who Says Women Aren’t Funny?” issue. The video featured female comedians, Tina Fey, Kristen Wiig, Maya Rudolph, and Sarah Silverman being photographed for the issue. Following the film, participants were asked the following questions: “(1) What are your impressions of the film? (2) What are some of the components of the film that show credibility? (3) Did you find the video controversial?” A lively discussion ensued as participants commented on the magazine’s premise for the argument about whether women are in fact funny. For the remainder of the hour long focus group, participants were presented with a series of *Vanity Fair* magazine covers.

The magazine covers that were selected for analysis were *Vanity Fair*’s “most memorable first impressions” over the past 25 years, as listed by the magazine itself on its website. Each cover appeared on the screen, one at a time, for five minutes.
Participants were asked to express their initial reaction to the image. Participants were then asked a series of questions, one at a time. The following questions were asked of the participants, in relation to their understanding of the cover image that was presented:

- What is your first impression of the cover?
- Who is privileged?
- By reading the headlines, what are some of the themes in the issue?
- Who do you think this issue is being targeted to?
- Would you have purchased this magazine at the time of its publication?

The discussion concluded after the final cover (September 2008) was analyzed.

**Worth a Thousand Words – Cover Content Analyses**

Price argues that “the content of popular media can be investigated as persuasive stimuli that shape public reactions to issues, as inputs to policymaking, or as the shared fund of information in the public domain. These materials provide data that complement those gathered through survey interviews” (1992: 86). Therefore, in addition to assessing the public’s understanding of material appearing in Condé Nast publications through both survey and focus group techniques, it is imperative that the actual form of the magazines be critiqued. As a research method, the analysis of visual and typographical content is both explicit and quantifiable. According to Philip Bell,
author of “Content Analysis of Visual Image”, this method of research requires, like quantitative methods, a comparative hypothesis and well-defined variables. He writes,

> Whether it is explicitly labeled content analysis or not, making generalizations about the relative frequencies of visual representations of particular classes of people, actions, roles, situations or events involves implicit or explicit classification and quantification of media-circulated content … Content analysis is an effective procedure only if precise hypotheses and clearly defined concepts underpin its use (Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001: 15).

In employing the Brooks Magazine Priority Index, an exhaustive and exclusive coding system divides each magazine cover by both typographical and visual content, according to its placement on the cover. The observable content is classified into categories of differing variables in order to illustrate the priorities of the magazines being analyzed. The eight categories are as follows: (a) politics; (b) entertainment; (c) sports; (d) style; (e) health; (f) beauty; (g) economics; (h) lifestyle. In addition to the categories being evaluated, the Index also examines the prevalence of words associated with ‘aspirational journalism’. Such terms were discovered during the Vanity Fair, Vogue, and GQ, focus groups. Participants highlighted the aspirational nature of the cover of each magazine, noting that each publication affirmed a distinctly prestigious nature through content and advertisements. In pulling a cross-section of buzz words
associated with ‘aspirational journalism’, the following words, as uttered by focus group participants, were used in the content analysis. The most prevalent words were, ‘fantasy’, ‘authoritative’, ‘privilege’, ‘influential’, ‘status’, ‘success’, ‘aspiration’, trends’, ‘rich’, and ‘power’. These ten words, as well as the synonyms of each word, were coded. The individual that appeared on each cover was also coded according to the classification of their status in popular culture – ‘Hollywood’, ‘Athlete’, ‘Political Figure’, and ‘Model’. The content analyses were done for *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *GQ*, using the 2008 issues of the magazines (January 2008 – December 2008).

**The View from the Top – Industry Interviews**

As Bell states, “content analysis alone is seldom able to support statements about the significance, effects or interpreted meaning of a domain of representation” (2001: 13). One of the most instructive methods employed in this pilot study was a series of in-depth interviews with industry professionals at Condé Nast. The interviewees were initially contacted by e-mail, which was subsequently followed by a letter sent in the mail, and then a follow-up e-mail. Interviews were arranged with the following individuals: Graydon Carter (Editor-in-Chief, *Vanity Fair*), David Friend (Editor of Creative Development, *Vanity Fair*), Tom Florio (Publisher, *Vogue*), and Michael Hainey (Deputy Editor, *GQ*). All interviewees provided consent and agreed to be tape-recorded for accuracy. The interview with David Friend took place in his office
at Vanity Fair, located in the Condé Nast building in New York City. The hour-long interview took place on March 25, 2009. All other interviews were conducted on the phone.
Chapter 4. Analysis/Discussion

“The task of propaganda is to attract followers,”
Hitler, Mein Kampf (1925)

Buy In and Buy Up: Introducing the Consumer’s Perspective

In 1948, communication scholars, Lazarsfeld and Merton, published an article titled, “Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action”, which argued that one of the consequences of media consumption by the masses was the passivity which was unconsciously encouraged through such consumption. They argued, “A continuous stream of tidbits about public affairs, might allow people to become too settled in their roles as spectators” (Price 1992: 83). Lazarsfeld and Merton refer to this phenomenon as the narcotizing dysfunction of mass communication (1948). With regard to the results of the four methods of measuring magazine consumer habits and their influence on the maintenance of public discourse, Lazarsfeld and Merton’s 1948 theory continues to hold true, as discovered through the multi-method approach applied in this pilot study. In fact, I would argue that given the prevalence of aspirational journalism techniques employed by Condé Nast, the aspiration-minded consumers who subscribe to the ideals posited by the publishing house, accept the magazine’s (be it Vanity Fair, Vogue, and/or GQ) agenda more readily than the demographic for whom the magazine is intended. This chapter sets to outline the results of the studies conducted in this pilot project – the survey of
magazine consumers’ purchasing habits; focus group findings that revealed the
aspirational techniques employed by Condé Nast magazines; key discoveries from
interviews with industry professionals at *Vanity Fair, Vogue,* and *GQ,* and, an in-depth
report on the visual and typographical analysis of the covers of the aforementioned
magazines. This chapter serves to illustrate that the perceived expertise espoused in
*Vanity Fair, Vogue,* and *GQ* seduces readers, not considered to be part of the
magazine’s intended audience, to submit themselves to the magazine’s ideals, and
therefore reproduce their mandate as public opinion. In *Public Opinion,* Price
references political scholar, David Fan, who posits that “the autonomy of public
opinion is more or less a mechanical reproduction of intellectual elite opinion
expressed by the media” (Price 1992: 87). While Price’s argument is correct, the
creation and maintenance of public opinion by non-traditional forms of journalism,
such as cultural magazines, is rarely considered. Such magazines, whose mandates
often refer to themselves as catalysts of cultural production, be it through fashion,
culture, entertainment, and political commentary, are dismissed by scholars interested
in deciphering how public discourse weaves itself through the social infrastructure of a
culture. In employing the Mass Market Magazine Survey, the Brooks Magazine
Consumption Method, the Brooks Magazine Priority Index, and informational
interviews with industry professionals at Condé Nast, this pilot study has revealed the

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infrastructure of the transmission of public opinion from opinion leaders to magazine consumers. The cultural credibility espoused by the aforementioned publications are readily accepted by their audiences. According to social psychologists Zakary Tormala, Pablo Brinol, and Richard E. Petty, authors of “When credibility attacks: The reverse impact of source credibility on persuasion”, a message’s credibility is often associated with the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of its source, which in turn, is heuristically interpreted by the receiver (2005: 684). They argue, “Whether the emphasis is on expertise or trustworthiness, high credibility sources have been found to be more persuasive than low credibility sources… Depending on message recipients’ extent of thinking, source credibility has been found to operate as a peripheral cue or heuristic” (2005: 684). With regard to this pilot study, the mechanisms through which high credibility sources persuade individuals needed to be examined in order to understand how *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *GQ* define the aspirations of its readers.

**Surveying Ideologies: The Habitus of Magazine Habits**

In order to understand the role the masses play in the maintenance of public discourse, it is important to analyze their information consumption. As a result, the first methodology that was employed in this pilot study was the Mass Market Magazine Survey. The reputational-association hypothesis and the perceived-status hypothesis were used in order to decipher the influence of the perceived credibility and
the subsequent influences of Condé Nast on its consumers. The reputational-association hypothesis contends that individuals subscribe to Condé Nast publications (specifically, *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *GQ*, as listed in the survey) due to its highly-esteemed reputation for producing publications with cultural clout and credibility. Magazines, such as *People* and *TIME* (as listed in the survey), which are not published by Condé Nast, are sought by the public for reasons other than their reputation, whereas *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *GQ* are consumed by the public based primarily on their status. Thus, according to the reputational-association hypothesis, subscription to Condé Nast publications is rooted in its reputation. As illustrated in the chart below, the relationship between Condé Nast magazine subscription and its reputational association has a high statistical significance (p ≤ .00).

**Table 4.1 – Subscription Reasoning: The Reputational-Association Hypothesis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for Subscribing</th>
<th>Condé Nast subscriber</th>
<th>Non-Condé Nast subscriber</th>
<th>Statistical Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reputational Assoc.</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political News</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Events</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trends</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrity News</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=72

According to survey respondents, 85% of Condé Nast subscribers, subscribe to their magazine of choice (*Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *GQ*), for its reputational association,
compared to 15% of non Condé Nast subscribers. “Political reasoning” was the second reason, following reputational association, why Condé Nast subscribers read the aforementioned magazines. Interestingly enough, the respondents were equally divided (50%/50%) for seeking celebrity news from Condé Nast publications.

Given that the publishing house has a greater association with cultivating credibility amongst the masses than magazines deemed to be of a lesser quality, a distinct appeal to consumers emerges as a result. Heuristically speaking, Condé Nast publications are synonymous with prestige and those who subscribe to them for $45.00 a year (per magazine), are convinced that they too are part of this exclusive community. The symbolic appeal of magazines such as *Vanity Fair, Vogue,* and *GQ,* is what seduces consumers into believing that the vicarious lifestyle that they are subscribing to is possible only from a distance. These findings provide insight that compliment the data gathered through interviews with industry professionals at Condé Nast, to be discussed further on in this chapter. The rose-colored perspectives offered by these magazines result in consumers receiving a taste of glamour without actually access to it.

Lippmann would argue that such an appeal is crucial for the maintenance of public opinion and is achieved through the use of symbols. He writes,
Symbols are often so useful and so mysteriously powerful that the word itself exhales a magical glamour. In thinking about symbols it is tempting to treat them as if they possessed independent energy… Since the offering of symbols is so generous, and the meaning that can be imputed is so elastic, how does any particular symbol take root in any particular person’s mind? It is planted there by another human being whom we recognize as authoritative. If it is planted deeply enough, it may be that later we shall call the person authoritative who waves that symbol at us. But in the first instance symbols are made congenial and important because they are introduced to us by congenial and important people (1922: 142).

The symbols connoted with Condé Nast are those of the New York intellectual elite – a group not defined by their stock portfolio, but by their interactions with the cultural visionaries they rub shoulders with at The Waverley Inn. They define the zeitgeist of the liberal landscape – infecting every article with cultural references that only those who read the New York Times Monday through Friday and watch HBO on Sundays can recognize. It is this reputation of elitism and the air of success and exclusivity that seeps through every issue of Vanity Fair, Vogue, and GQ, that illustrates that these magazines are more than just periodicals; they are defining instruments that promote the established reputation of Manhattan’s intellectual elite.
The second hypothesis examined in this pilot study was the perceived-status hypothesis, which contends that individuals who read Condé Nast magazines (*Vanity Fair, Vogue*, and *GQ*, as stated in the Mass Market Magazine Survey) once a month or more, are likely to believe that Americans “consume tabloid journalism often” (as stated in the MMMS). The findings of the hypothesis, approach statistical significance (p = .07), revealing that those respondents who claimed that they read Condé Nast publications “once a month or more” consider themselves to be consuming “high” cultural journalism, whereas they assume that the “majority of Americans” consume “tabloid journalism often”, a form of journalism often associated with “low culture”. This finding parallels the conclusions drawn from the reputational-association hypothesis, further supporting the argument that Condé Nast publications present consumers with a view of reality which privileges movers and shakers and discards those left perusing the glamour from the grocery aisle.

**Table 4.2 – High vs. Low Journalism: The Perceived-Status Hypothesis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Questions</th>
<th>“Read[s] Tabloid Journalism”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Not Often”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Read[s] Condé Nast Publications Once a Month or More”</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the Condé Nast subscribers who responded in the Mass Market Magazine Survey that they read a Condé Nast magazine “once a month or more”, 56.5% of those
respondents believe that “the majority of Americans” consume “tabloid journalism often”. These results illustrate that the diametrically opposed assumptions regarding “high” versus “low” culture are encouraged by the mandates published by the aforementioned magazines. Referring to these magazines as “cultural catalysts” or “drivers of dialogue”, their readers adopt a similar cultural vernacular that praises Annie Leibovitz and dismisses the paparazzi.

**The People Speak: Focus Group Findings**

In *Public Opinion*, Price notes that social scientists have identified that public debate often takes shape around thematic clusters of issues. He writes,

“Public opinion researchers have also taken a more interpretive approach to media content analysis, to gain insight into the way media frame the terms of public debate. Every issue, they argue, has its own ‘catalogue of metaphors, catch-phrases, appeals to principles, and the like’. Participants in public debate encounter these, not as individual items, but as schematic clusters of ideas or interpretive packages” (1992: 87).

One of the key findings from the series of three focus groups, representing each magazine was the realization that each magazine employed the same “schematic cluster of ideas” that focused on the notion of aspirations. Based on the revelations of focus group participants, the term ‘aspirational journalism’ was adopted. With the three
magazines (*Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *GQ*) highlighting aspirational cues on their cover, a persuasive linguistic stimulus encouraging readers to ‘aspire to be greater’ appeared consistently on every cover analyzed. The terms which were continuously raised by focus group participants’ impressions of the covers, were related to aspirations. The top ten words uttered by the forty focus group participants’ are, ‘fantasy’, ‘authoritative’, ‘privileged’, ‘influential’, ‘status’, ‘success’, ‘aspiration’, ‘trends’, ‘rich’, ‘power’. These ten terms were then coded as part of the visual and typographical analysis of the covers of a year’s worth of issues of *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue* and *GQ*.

In the *Vogue* focus group, many of the participants’ comments focused on the notion that the magazine, while aesthetically appealing, is presented in a manner that is unattainable. One participant commented,

*Although I am sure the magazine does a lot of demographic research, I think there is this tacit assumption that if you are reading the magazine [Vogue], either you want to be rich and skinny and live in New York, or you are that already and you want to maintain that style. But I think that part of it is that is what is privileged in society already and then *Vogue* assumes that is the goal that people want, or that it is their fantasy world, even if they live it.*
The consensus amongst the nine participants in the *Vogue* focus group was that the content of the magazine is primarily fantastical. One participant noted, “I would be amazed if even 10% of the readers were anywhere close to those aspirations [put forth by *Vogue*]. It is mostly a fantasy book.” Similar comments were echoed by fellow participants. At the beginning of the discussion, participants were given a survey to complete regarding basic facts about the magazine and its demographics. While many of the participants expressed that *Vogue* was intended for an audience that strived for or survived living the New York lifestyle of glamour and prestige, it is interesting to note that the average median household income that they assumed was over $10,000.00 lower than the actual median household income (see table 4.3). On average, participants listed $55,600.00 as the median household income of a *Vogue* reader, whereas in reality, according to Condé Nast, the median household income for a *Vogue* reader is $65,908.00. In fact all focus group participants, regardless of the magazine they were discussing, assumed that the median household income was lower than in reality. While *Vogue* focus group participants perceived the magazine as catering to an intellectual elite sect, participant responses illustrate that the magazine in fact has the lowest perceived median household income.
Table 4.3 – Participants Perceived Median Household Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Vanity Fair Participants</th>
<th>GQ Participants</th>
<th>Vogue Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Median Household Income According to Condé Nast</td>
<td>$69,265.00</td>
<td>$70,732.00</td>
<td>65,908.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants’ Average Perceived HHI</td>
<td>$58,000.00</td>
<td>$56,000.00</td>
<td>$55,000.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=40

In order to measure participants’ confidence in their understanding of the magazine, they were asked who is the Editor-in-Chief, and what popular film was based on this woman. 55.5% of participants knew that Anna Wintour was the Editor-in-Chief of the magazine, whereas 77.7% of participants knew that the movie, *The Devil Wears Prada* was based on *Vogue*’s Editor-in-Chief and her relationship with her assistant. As illustrated in the table below (see table 4.4), of all the magazines discussed in the focus groups, *Vogue* was the publication with the greatest reference point for participants, specifically in terms of participants knowing the magazine’s Editor-in-Chief. The *Vogue* focus group was also the only focus group with the highest number of participants who claimed that they read the publication being discussed. It is important to state that participants were chosen at random for each magazine.
Table 4.4 – Focus Group Findings: 
Readers versus Editor-in-Chief

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Vanity Fair Participants</th>
<th>GQ Participants</th>
<th>Vogue Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Read Said Magazine</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
<td>55.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identified Editor-in-Chief</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>55.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=40

Price argues that popular media is at its best a vehicle for ideological manipulation. He writes, “The content of popular media can be investigated as persuasive stimuli that shape public reactions to issues, as inputs to policymaking, or as the shared fund of information in the public domain” (1992: 86). While *Vogue* appeared to be synonymous with fantasy, as expressed by focus group participants, *GQ* appeared to represent a jarring combination of both populist articles and intellectual elite reference points. One participant argued, “*GQ* is the Pepsi to *Esquire*’s Coke … There is a fine line between being an intellectual magazine and one you just flip through at the grocery store, and I think *GQ* tries to do both.” What made participants hesitant to conflate *GQ* with any other men’s magazine such as *Esquire* and *Maxim*, is the ‘aspirational’ component of its articles. “The *GQ* man is a higher echelon male,” argued one participant. “He is not just Joe off the street.” Many of the participants commented that the magazine’s choice to put individuals in their thirties on the cover, instead of individuals in their twenties, contributed to the aspirational component of the magazine. “It makes sense that there are not many men in their twenties on the cover,
but instead men in their thirties, it cultivates aspirations for those readers who are in their twenties,” expressed one participant. “This is who we should want to be”. While many of the participants recognized that the magazine was a navigator for those who wished to become a ‘gentleman’, it is interesting to note that *GQ* was the magazine with the lowest reference point for participants (see table 4.4). None of the participants could identify Jim Nelson as its Editor-in-Chief, nor could they identify who was on the February (the month the focus group took place) cover, or the March cover.

Participants were not shown the current month’s cover, but were asked to recall if they knew whom it was anyway. This question was asked in order to identify the participant’s familiarity with the magazine in question. Of all the focus groups, the *GQ* focus group had the lowest number of participants who could not identify the individual on either the current cover or the next month’s cover.

**Table 4.5 – Focus Group Findings:**
*Ability to Identify the Individual on Cover*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th><em>Vanity Fair</em> Participants</th>
<th><em>GQ</em> Participants</th>
<th><em>Vogue</em> Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identified the Individual on the Current Cover</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identified the Individual on the Next Month’s Cover</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=40
It is interesting to note that the individuals who appeared on the covers of the issues that participants were able to identify, were President Barack Obama (February 2009 cover of *Vanity Fair*) and First Lady Michelle Obama (March 2009 cover of *Vogue*). While one could argue that it makes sense for participants to name the President of the United States and his wife as likely being on the cover of an influential magazine, given the media saturation of the Obamas, participants could have likely glossed over this power couple, as if they were on the cover of any other magazine – ranging from *US Weekly* to *TIME*. But instead, the esteemed reputation associated with Condé Nast publications bestows a greater reliability to the story at hand.

During the *Vanity Fair* focus group, participants spoke about the element of trust associated with the magazine. They revealed that they trusted the feature and style writing in the magazine. “I would believe them if they said something was stylish, I mean they know more about it than I do,” one participant noted. “Once they acknowledge something, it is true in some sense – reputation has a lot to do with it.” Of the three focus groups, the *Vanity Fair* focus group was the only group of participants who emphasized the society component of the magazine. Many participants commented on the notion of intellectual elite dinner parties and social gatherings as being some of the expected content in a given issue. When asked who, according to them, is privileged in *Vanity Fair*, one participant pinpointed “people who
go to dinner parties for charities” as being a prime demographic. Such a remark epitomizes the high brow tone that the magazine presents to the public.

From Within – A Word from Those on the Inside

“We are just telling stories – that is what cavemen did, what troubadours did,” explained David Friend, Editor of Creative Development at Vanity Fair in an exclusive interview on March 25, 2009. “That is what I got into the business to do – to tell stories and try to affect change”. After meeting with Friend in his office on the 22nd floor of the Condé Nast building at 4 Times Square, it is hard not to be intimidated by this Vanity Fair veteran. His contributions to the cultural journalism community are unprecedented and every special project he has done for the magazine, (i.e. Editor of Vanity Fair Portraits: 1913-2008) is consigned to posterity. With a keenness for providing readers with the ultimate insider perspective, Friend single-handedly broke the story that Mark Felt was “Deep Throat” in the Watergate Scandal. He launched VanityFair.com in 2001, and has won numerous journalism awards including Emmy and Peabody Awards as an executive producer of the CBS documentary 9/11.

Friend attributes his eleven year commitment to the magazine to Graydon Carter, Vanity Fair’s Editor-in-Chief. “I was attracted by Graydon Carter as the editor. I have known him for almost twenty years. A strong editor’s voice brings a magazine personality and I knew that here was a magazine with a voice,” he said. During the
interview it was evident that Friend was nostalgic for the bygone days of journalism. He lamented,

*Fortune* magazine in the [19]40s, *Time* magazine in the [19]30s, *Life* magazine in the [19]50s, under Ed Thompson. *Rolling Stone* under Jann Wenner in the [19]70s, *Esquire* in the [19]60s - these were all men’s magazines that had a voice and so I was attracted by this idea that a strong top editor was saying something.

Friend also noted that what originally attracted him to *Vanity Fair* eleven years ago was the reputation of the magazine. He said, “[What] attracted me is that it [Vanity Fair] was one of the top magazines in the country in terms of buzz and in terms of people gravitating to it and caring about it. And, they had to have it, they had to go to the newsstand to get it, or open their mailbox and get it – it was an addiction.” He also credits the credibility and cultural clout associated with the publication as providing him with greater incentive to join the editorial team at *Vanity Fair*:

*Vanity Fair* is in that wonderful highest echelon of the magazine business. [It is] a really celebrated magazine that people were reading and I would go [out] soon thereafter - I didn’t realize this at the time - but anything you would write, everybody was talking about it – not everybody, but the right people in the culture, the bright people in the culture were taking notice of what you were
doing and so you were speaking to a certain set – in the same way that the “smart” magazines in the teens, [19]20s and [19]30s, were appealing to a certain establishment culture, but also a bohemian culture, and also a culture that was in the know, [and] had to remain in the know in order to have any influence on the cultural conversation.

Friend’s reference to the “right people” and the “bright people” as being consumers of the magazine, further strengthens Price’s notion that a “tyranny of the majority” is what threatens the masses own creation of public opinion. If what Friend is arguing is correct, Lazarsfeld’s understanding of opinion leaders as those who influence a community appears to be a case in point. As previously stated by Lazarsfeld, “opinion leaders had/have contact with relevant information supplied from outside their immediate circle…It was observed that the opinion leaders receive a disproportionate amount of their external information from media appropriate to their niche” (1948: 67).

Friend is not the only editor at Condé Nast to argue that the periodical for which they write defines the culture in which the masses either strive for success, or thrive in it. Tom Florio, Publisher of *Vogue* and a Condé Nast employee for over 25 years, argues that it is magazines like *Vogue*, and other Condé Nast publications in general, that track that which is relevant and this is often traditionally what the Editor-in-Chief of the magazine deems as relevant. He states,
In the case of Vogue today, 1 out of every 10 American women, sees Vogue every month. We have 10.6 million readers…That is why an editor like Anna Wintour is so important, because if she likes an idea and covers it in the magazine, or if she has a point of view, there is a change in the value system. What we [at Vogue] did just recently by putting Michelle Obama on the cover, that was much more than putting the first First Lady who is Black on the cover, that was also a message about women of substance, women of the people, women who are substantial and care about the way they look and present themselves to the world.

Florio references the notion of the ‘Fusion Theory’ as one of the main reasons why Vogue is the “largest profit-producing magazine and Condé Nast’s most important property”. The ‘Fusion Theory’ is a theory he has adopted from Malcolm Gladwell’s 2000 bestseller, The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference, which argues that “The tipping point is the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point … Ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread like viruses do.” (Gladwell 2000: 12). For Florio, the theory refers to how ideas move through a culture. He insists that a magazine like Vogue has managed over its 120 years of publishing, to bridge the gap between those who make ideas and those who consume them. He said, “With the ‘Fusion Theory’ there are change agents and there are
masses. The interesting thing about *Vogue* as a brand is that it has both the change agents and the masses in the same environment so that is why it is able to ignite an idea. Whereas a book like *The New Yorker* is more about the change agents.” Florio also applauds *Vogue* as being a magazine that has reported on some of the most defining moments in cultural history, from a perspective that praises both women’s style and substance. In fact, many *Vogue* focus group participants noted that the magazine does celebrate women of stature. One participate noted, “They [*Vogue*] do profile big-time powerful women; they [*Vogue*] do get powerful ones to be on the cover”.

Florio echoed this realization, arguing that the magazine is what has helped define the status of women during definitive moments in history:

The part of *Vogue* that is ultimately so influential is that it puts the woman at the center of the culture, not the center of the story. If you look back historically, putting Lee Miller on the cover during World War II, having her photographed from the [war] front, and [then] Coretta Scott King during the Civil Rights Movement was covered in *Vogue*, like Shirley Chisholm was, so you know this idea that the woman is the driving force of the culture 120 years ago was a pretty big idea.

In terms of aspirational journalism, as defined by the focus group participants, *Vogue*, at least according to Florio, feeds on women’s aspirations and desires. He argues that
the two driving forces of the magazine are (i) visual genius – achieved through strategic cover photographs, and (ii) optimism – revealing a world of unprecedented aesthetics to their readers. As Florio said,

\[ \text{Vogue} \] is not about a woman’s deficiencies, it is about her dreams. So the essence of \textit{Vogue} initially was to give a woman her best essence of self – give her permission to dream, but not dream of herself in the context of a man, but dream of herself with her own female powerbase. Fashion became very much a part of this because that is how she expressed herself. That is the DNA of \textit{Vogue}.

While Florio argues that \textit{Vogue} is a magazine that has thrived as a result of its escapist mentality for women, a magazine at Condé Nast which appears to have built its reputation based on monitoring the desires of the ‘everyman’, is none other than \textit{GQ}. Florio argued,

What is interesting about \textit{GQ} is that its brilliance originally, was that it was a magazine for men who weren’t privileged, who didn’t grow up with a silver spoon, who didn’t come from the intellectual elite, with the private schools [etc.] – but, who were smart, upwardly mobile, [they were] getting out of school with their degree and their good first job, and they cared very much
about transcending social strata. So *GQ* was a magazine about how to live this life.

What *Vogue* has done for defining aspirations for women, in terms of aesthetics, access, and Armani, *GQ* has done for men – but in a manner that privileges the “*GQ* guy”. As Florio explained,

There is this whole sensibility about who this *GQ* guy was, and basically, he was this guy – like this guy everybody wanted to be – which is someone who is [an] individual, but desired by the group. You know, men like to see themselves as the rugged individualist – like the Marlboro man – but ultimately they have a sense of belonging. And the way men show each other what group they belong to is through mastery, and if you think about it, think of any kind of guy you know – it is the clubs you belong to, the teams you’re on, it is mastery – and that is how men show what group they belong to. But they want to be seen as the individual that everyone wants to be.

It is ironic that readers commit themselves to the ideals of magazines such as *Vogue* and *GQ*, and yet rarely are the aspirations that appear in the publication, achievable for readers. “*GQ* was this magazine that was this opportunity to transcend and move into a higher opportunity in life, and live a richer and better life,” commented Florio. “It was the American dream – and that is where its influence came from ultimately”. While the
notion of the American dream may have evolved over the years, it is still in its element, founded on the idea that regardless of one’s beginnings, they can achieve success – be it political, financial, and/or social. With the masses yearning to achieve such a dream, magazines such as *Vogue* and *GQ* established themselves as vehicles to achieve such success, and in the end, selling success to those who strive for it is profitable.

Michael Hainey, Deputy Editor of *GQ*, also attributes desires as being one of the key elements that make a magazine like *Gentleman’s Quarterly* successful. He argues that you can’t underestimate the power of a beautiful woman dressed in a sexy manner with an interesting story. “You want someone of the moment and if you add a layer of sex and sizzle, it sells,” he explained in a phone interview on April 3, 2009 from his office in New York City. It is with that age-old philosophy that *GQ*’s January 2009 issue was the magazine’s top selling issue of the past ten years. The issue featured Jennifer Aniston wearing nothing but a man’s tie. The issue created a lot of buzz and Aniston appeared on numerous talk shows to discuss the issue – eventually presenting David Letterman with the now-famous men’s tie during their interview. Hainey echoes Florio’s perception of the magazine as providing its readers with guidance on how to live a better life – one filled with sartorial sex appeal and single malt. He commented,
The *GQ* reader is curious about the world, seeking to make themselves the best they can be. *GQ* is not simply a “fashion magazine” but a magazine about style and intelligence. Readers are asking themselves ‘how do I live smarter in this world?’ and *GQ* presents to them ideas they need to know about to engage life in the fullest. The magazine helps direct people – it leads you to where you need to be going, what you should know about.

While Hainey recognizes that the magazine can be considered as a map for how the modern man should navigate himself in the world, he also recognizes that such directions are often superficial. “Do I wish that some of our fantastic political articles could appear on the cover?” He noted, “Yes, but I am also a realist and I know that some of our other stories have a broader appeal. And at the end of the day, we need to sell copies on the newsstand.” From T&A to Tinseltown to wasabi tuna, the magazine has become the quintessential guidebook for the ‘man about town’. As he explained, “*GQ* is an expert on how to live an intelligent life - We are an expert on how to enjoy the world… [and] we have to have our antenna up all the time”.

**Judging by the Cover – A Discussion**

The notion of expertise is a concept that appears on every cover of *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *GQ*. In order to understand which messages were being disseminated to the public through strategic cover choices, and to better understand the manner in which
the public responded to such images and headlines, an in-depth content analysis was conducted. Using the Brooks Magazine Priority Index, a year’s worth (January 2008 to December 2008) of covers of *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *GQ* were analyzed. The content analyses set to measure the aspirational attitudes expressed on the covers – achieved through coding each cover according to whether one of the ten ‘aspirational’ terms (and/or synonyms of the terms) were listed. Of the 36 magazines analyzed, 97.2% of the issues contained an ‘aspirational’ term. For *Vanity Fair*, 83.3% of the covers analyzed contained three or more aspirational terms. For *Vogue*, 66.6% of the covers contained three or more terms, while 91.6% of the *GQ* covers contained three or more aspirational terms. With both Hainey and Florio arguing that *GQ* was the most aspiration-focused magazine, it is no surprise that of the three Condé Nast publications, the magazine that was originally founded by “upwardly mobile” men striving to “transcend social strata”, would have the highest number of aspirational terms on its covers – successfully maintaining the magazine’s original mandate.

With survey respondents revealing that second to reading Condé Nast publications for the reputational association, they read it for “political news”, it is interesting to note that the magazine with the highest number of ‘political’ references on its cover for 2008 was *Vanity Fair* with 21 political headlines; whereas *GQ* had 14,
and *Vogue* had 4. The table below reveals the percentage of headlines (by category) that appeared on the 2008 covers.

**Table 4.6 – Priorities in Print: Examining the Categorical Content of Covers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th><em>Vanity Fair</em></th>
<th><em>GQ</em></th>
<th><em>Vogue</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Political’</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>4.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Entertainment’</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Sports’</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Style’</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>39.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Health’</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Beauty’</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Economy’</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Lifestyle’</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>33.0%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=36

It can therefore be argued that of the three magazines examined, *Vanity Fair* is more “politically” oriented in its content, as determined by the headlines on its covers, with 34.1% of the headlines referencing political material. *GQ* on the other hand, hailed as the Bible for men seeking to improve both their status and style, focuses the majority of its content on “lifestyle” articles (33%). Whereas it is no surprise that *Vogue*’s content focuses primarily on “style” (39.1%). It can be argued that these three magazines, while consumed by the public for their reputation, offer an insight to readers in three influential categories – politics, lifestyle, and style. The magazines’ motivation for focusing the majority of their headlines on one of these three categories illustrates their awareness of the priorities of their readership. However, the stories that
are presented in these categories are written from a perspective that offers readers an instructive manner in which they can consume the information presented to them.
Chapter 5. Conclusion

“A wise man makes his own decisions, an ignorant man follows public opinion,”
Chinese proverb

In Communication and Persuasion: Psychological Studies of Opinion Change, authors Charles Hovland, Irving L. Janis, and Harold H. Kelley, argue that in terms of persuasion techniques, the medium of the message is crucial. They argue, “The impact of a message depends upon the particular publication or channel through which it is transmitted. The credibility of an advertisement seems to be related to some extent to the reputation of the particular magazine in which it appears” (1953: 19). Hovland et al.’s tenet that it is the credibility of a message’s conduit that determines its level of persuasion is essential for understanding the power of Condé Nast to present narratives of influence to the public. The purpose of this pilot study was to determine how much the authority of a publication (i.e. 
Vanity Fair, Vogue and GQ) affected readers’ understanding and acceptance of its content. In applying a multi-method approach, such as the Mass Market Magazine Survey, the Brooks Magazine Priority Index, the Brooks Magazine Consumption Method, and in-depth interviews with Condé Nast opinion leaders – David Friend, Tom Florio, Michael Hainey and Graydon Carter, a distinct concept emerged that can be used to refer to cultural magazines that have a similar level of influence as periodicals such as The New York Times – “aspirational journalism”.

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The term, “aspirational journalism” developed initially based on the responses from focus group participants, who felt that there was a distinct tone to the magazines analyzed (Vanity Fair, Vogue, and GQ). Through the use of such words as ‘fantasy’, ‘authoritative’, ‘privileged’, ‘influential’, ‘status’, ‘success’, ‘aspiration’, ‘trends’, ‘rich’, and ‘power’, focus group participants revealed their reaction toward the magazine being discussed – whether they had had exposure to its contents or not. The magazine – whether it is Vanity Fair, Vogue, or GQ – presents readers with a perspective, be it based on politics, style, lifestyles, or health, that invite them to both consider and adopt the perspective, without allowing them to participate in the discussion of it. Readers of these magazines emerge as experts on the content presented by the publication and return to their social circles to disseminate the perspective that was presented to them. However, given that the content is made available to these individuals veiled in a vernacular that feeds on their desires and aspirations, it is impossible for readers to critically analyze that which is being presented to them. Disguised with cultural references that speak to high brow sensibilities, punctuated with the infamous wit of the writer, and glorified with an aesthetic that is unparalleled, the articles in Vanity Fair, Vogue and GQ, are merely propagated narratives centered around, the priorities of their Editor-in-Chief. These vanity pieces however, have consequences for the readership at-large who consider
these pieces as representing public opinion. With many opinion leaders subscribing to the ideals presented in these publications, and thereby disseminating the voices of Graydon Carter, Anna Wintour, and Jim Nelson to the masses, the hierarchical space between the public and the intellectual elite continues to widen, with each article contributing to this gap.

Albert Bandura, author of *Social Learning Theory*, argues that it is through both visual media and observing others that individuals learn about the manner in which they should act in a given society. He writes,

> Human behaviors are learned observationally through modeling; from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action… [An] influential source of social learning behavior is the abundant and varied symbolic modeling provided by television, films, and other visual media (1977: 37).

While Bandura emphasizes that visual media such as television and film are key to influencing behavior, I would argue that the Condé Nast magazines analyzed in this pilot study could be considered “visual media” in terms of the brand that has been established around their specific publication. These magazines are more than just monthly periodicals; they are a beacon of ideological guidance for those who seek
prestige, prominence, and power in their lives – whether achieved through fashion, culture, or lifestyle changes. With the reputational-association hypothesis illustrating that Condé Nast readers consume the magazine for its reputation, it can be argued that the magazine’s status is one that is rooted in its capacity to maintain established social cues that privilege those in power, while enticing those on the outside to aspire, but not achieve, said status. The perceived-status hypothesis contends that individuals who read Condé Nast magazines believe that the majority of Americans read tabloid news – this argument illustrates that those readers of magazines such as *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *GQ*, develop an elitist attitude toward the masses, believing that those non-Condé Nast readers resort to low-brow journalism, such as tabloids. This only further strengthens Condé Nast’s mandate that their magazines “drive the dialogue globally” – however, only for those who are invited to participate – public intellectuals and opinion leaders.

Future research in this pilot study would involve studying the opinion retention of the masses. *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *GQ* pride themselves on looking past the horizon for new ideas. As stated by Friend,

We also try to look beyond the horizon – you are not going to find something in the magazine that happened two months ago. We have people who just know what is happening, who know what is coming down the pipe, and they can see
exactly what is coming right over the horizon – the early warning, whether it be fashion, literature, movies. These are impressions that we are trying to share with the reader so that the reader is in the know.

As a result, the perspectives of editors and writers at these publications will subsequently change, thereby altering the perspectives of opinion leaders and thus the masses. It would be interesting to examine the opinion retention of the opinion leaders as they appear to be the crucial middle component between the movers/shakers, and the consumers. It would also be interesting to examine the change in opinion retention post 2008, given that this was a tumultuous year for journalism considering the coverage of the Presidential election.

As previously argued, many scholars believe that magazines, cultural magazines specifically, do not have a place in the hierarchy of news journalism. Such publications are often dismissed based on the age-old trope that the holy trinity of newspapers (The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Wall Street Journal) define what is considered to be newsworthy. In today’s changing media environment, those members of the public who wish to stay informed according to the ideals of the intellectual elite seek out Condé Nast magazines which offer readers a more in-depth and investigated approach to mainstream news items due to the resources that the publishing house has at their disposal. While the credibility of the articles that appear
in these papers cannot be discounted, the potential of cultural magazines, such as *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *GQ*, to shape public opinion continues to be disregarded by scholars. The findings in this pilot study illustrate that consumers of these publications seek information that will allow them to be considered to be in the know, in a manner that newspapers cannot. Given the temporal and spatial capabilities of magazines such as *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *GQ*, readers submit themselves to more than just the cover story which enticed them to purchase the issue in the first place. They are also offered talking points which they can use at their next social gathering to further solidify themselves as opinion leaders in their social circle. Newspapers do not have that influential capacity. *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *GQ*, provides readers with insight into a sector of society of which they are not part of, but can pretend to be, for $45.00 a month.
Methodological Appendices

APPENDIX 1

“The Mass Market Magazine Survey”

1- I agree to answer the following questions to the best of my abilities. I also acknowledge that my participation in this study is voluntary and at any point I can decide to leave the survey.

  o Yes
  o No
MAGAZINE PURCHASING HABITS

2- Do you subscribe to magazines?
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

3- If yes, for which of the magazines do you have a subscription? (You may choose more than one).
   ○ TIME Magazine
   ○ PEOPLE Magazine
   ○ Vanity Fair Magazine
   ○ Vogue Magazine
   ○ GQ Magazine
   ○ The New Yorker Magazine

4- If you subscribe to a magazine that was not listed above, please list the magazine(s) below:
   ○ __________________
   ○ __________________
   ○ __________________

5- If you answered ‘yes’ to question 1, what is your reasoning behind your subscription? (check all that apply).
   ○ Political News
   ○ Celebrity News
   ○ Style Trends
   ○ World Events
   ○ Reputation of the Magazine

6- If you answered ‘yes; to question 1, in addition to your subscription, do you buy magazines off the shelf/in the supermarket?
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

7- If yes, which ones? (Please list top three in terms of most prevalent)
   ○ __________________
   ○ __________________
   ○ __________________
MAGAZINE READING HABITS

8- How often do you read each of the following magazines?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Magazine</th>
<th>Once a month or more</th>
<th>Less than once a month</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vanity Fair</td>
<td>o</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vogue</td>
<td>o</td>
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<tr>
<td>GQ</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New Yorker</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9- Do you read a daily print newspaper?
   o Yes
   o No

10- If yes, which one(s)?
   o The Washington Post
   o The New York Times
   o The Wall Street Journal
   o Local newspaper
   o I do not read a newspaper

11- If you read a local newspaper, which one do you read?
   o ______________________

12- Do you read a daily newspaper online?
   o Yes
   o No

13- If yes, which news sites do you visit on a daily basis? (Please list top three in terms of most prevalent).
   o ______________________
   o ______________________
   o ______________________
CONSIDER YOURSELF … AND MAGAZINES

14- During the 2008 Presidential Election, did you seek information about candidates through non-traditional forms of journalism? (i.e. tabloid newspapers, celebrity magazines, political blogs, cultural journalism \([\text{Vanity Fair, GQ, Vogue, The New Yorker}]\)).
   - Yes
   - No

15- If yes, which of the following? (Select all that apply).
   - Tabloid newspapers
   - Celebrity magazines
   - Political blogs
   - Cultural magazines \((\text{i.e. Vanity Fair, GQ, Vogue, The New Yorker})\)

16- How often do you think Americans consume each of the following types of journalism on a monthly basis?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tabloid journalism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion, beauty, and health magazines</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>National newspapers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
CONSUMER REPORT

17- How old are you?
   o Age: _____________

18- Please indicate your highest education level:
   o Some high school
   o High school
   o Some college
   o Undergraduate degree
   o Some graduate study
   o Graduate study
   o Professional degree
   o Doctorate
APPENDIX 2:
“THE BROOKS MAGAZINE CONSUMPTION METHOD”

VOGUE Focus Group – February 20, 2009

• Questionnaires:

The Vogue Reader

1- What do you think is the median age of the Vogue reader?
2- What do you think is the median household income of the Vogue reader?
3- What do you think is the ratio (%) of male to female readers?
4- Do you read Vogue?
5- Do you know anyone who reads Vogue regularly? (i.e. once every couple of months)
6- If so, what is your relation to this person?

Vogue Magazine

1- Who do you think is the Editor-in-Chief of Vogue?
2- Who is on this month’s (February) cover of Vogue?
3- Who will be on next month’s (March) cover of Vogue?
4- What was the name of the film that depicted Vogue magazine and its Editor-in-Chief?
5- Which sells more magazines – subscriptions or newsstands?
• **Discussion Questions:**

1- What comes to mind when you think about *Vogue* magazine? What are some of your impressions?

2- What kind of content do you expect to find in an issue of *Vogue*?

3- If you were to read an issue of *Vogue*, what components of the magazine would you trust? (i.e. trends, style, health, politics)

4- Why?

5- Who do you think is privileged in the magazine?

• **Questions regarding film clip:**

(Clip: http://www.style.com/video/vogue-diaries-the-shape-issue/1898342327)

1- What are your impressions of this film?

2- What are some of the components of the film that show credibility?

3- Did you find the video controversial?

• **Questions for Analyzing Covers:**

1- What is your first impression of this cover?

2- Who is privileged?

3- By reading the headlines, what are some themes in this issue?

4- Who do you think this issue is being targeted to?
• Slides (Covers analyzed by participants):
GQ Focus Group – February 24, 2009

- **Questionnaires:**

  **The GQ Reader**

  1- What do you think is the median age of the GQ reader?
  2- What do you think is the median household income of the GQ reader?
  3- What do you think is the ratio (%) of male to female readers?
  4- Do you read GQ?
  5- Do you know anyone who reads GQ regularly? (i.e. once every couple of months)
  6- If so, what is your relation to this person?

  **GQ Magazine**

  1- What does GQ stand for?
  2- Who do you think is the Editor-in-Chief of GQ?
  3- Who is on this month’s (February) issue of GQ?
  4- Who will be on next month’s (March) cover of GQ?
  5- Who did GQ name as ‘Woman of the Year’ for 2008?
  6- Which sells more magazines – subscriptions or newsstands?
• **Discussion Questions:**

1- What comes to mind when you think about *GQ* magazine? What are some of your impressions?

2- What kind of content do you expect to find in an issue of *GQ*?

3- If you were to read an issue of *GQ*, what components of the magazine would you trust? (i.e. trends, style, health, politics)

4- Why?

5- Who do you think is privileged in the magazine?

• **Questions regarding film clip:**

(Clip: http://men.style.com/video/from-gq/from-igqi/3000768001/gq-inaugurate-this/3177917001 )

1- What are your impressions of this film?

2- What are some of the components of the film that show credibility?

3- Did you find the video controversial?

• **Questions for Analyzing Covers:**

1- What is your first impression of this cover?

2- Who is privileged?

3- By reading the headlines, what are some themes in this issue?

4- Who do you think this issue is being targeted to?
• Slides (Covers analyzed by participants):
• Questionnaires:

**The Vanity Fair Reader**

1- What do you think is the median age of the *Vanity Fair* reader?
2- What do you think is the median household income of the *Vanity Fair* reader?
3- What do you think is the ratio (%) of male to female readers?
4- Do you read *Vanity Fair*?
5- Do you know anyone who reads *Vanity Fair* regularly? (i.e. once every couple of months)
   6- If so, what is your relation to this person?

**Vanity Fair Magazine**

1- Who is the Editor-in-Chief of *Vanity Fair*?
2- Who is on this month’s (March) cover of *Vanity Fair*?
3- Who will be on next month’s (April) issue of *Vanity Fair*?
4- What was the title of the book/upcoming movie that was written by a former assistant to the Editor-in-Chief about his experiences at *Vanity Fair*?
5- Which sells more magazines – subscriptions or newsstands?
• **Discussion Questions:**

1- What comes to mind when you think about *Vanity Fair* magazine? What are some of your impressions?

2- What kind of content do you expect to find in an issue of *Vanity Fair*?

3- If you were to read an issue of *Vanity Fair*, what components of the magazine would you trust? (i.e. trends, style, health, politics)

4- Why?

5- Who do you think is privileged in the magazine?

• **Questions regarding film clip:**

(Clip: http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/video/2008/funnygirls_video200804)

1- What are your impressions of this film?

2- What are some of the components of the film that show credibility?

3- Did you find the video controversial?

• **Questions for Analyzing Covers:**

1- What is your first impression of this cover?

2- Who is privileged?

3- By reading the headlines, what are some themes in this issue?

4- Who do you think this issue is being targeted to?
• Slides (Covers analyzed by participants):
# APPENDIX 3:

“THE BROOKS MAGAZINE PRIORITY INDEX”

*Vanity Fair 2008 Covers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vanity Fair</th>
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<tr>
<td>(January 2008 – June 2008)</td>
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<td>January 2008</td>
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<td><img src="image1" alt="Vanity Fair" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>March 2008</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 2008</td>
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<td><img src="image5" alt="Vanity Fair" /></td>
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<td>Vanity Fair</td>
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<td><strong>July 2008</strong></td>
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<td><img src="image1" alt="July 2008 Cover" /></td>
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<td><strong>September 2008</strong></td>
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<td><img src="image3" alt="September 2008 Cover" /></td>
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<td><strong>November 2008</strong></td>
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<td><img src="image5" alt="November 2008 Cover" /></td>
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### VOGUE 2008 Covers

*Vogue*
(January 2008 – June 2008)

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
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<td>Vogue</td>
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<td>July 2008</td>
<td>![Image](170x551 to 227x630)</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 2008</td>
<td>![Image](170x458 to 226x538)</td>
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<td>September 2008</td>
<td>![Image](167x340 to 230x428)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2008</td>
<td>![Image](167x659 to 230x840)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2008</td>
<td>![Image](167x541 to 230x732)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2008</td>
<td>![Image](167x431 to 230x622)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### GQ 2008 Covers

*GQ*
(January 2008 – June 2008)

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<td>Month</td>
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<td>September 2008</td>
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<td><img src="image9" alt="Image" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>December 2008</td>
<td><img src="image11" alt="Image" /></td>
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March 25, 2009

Interview with David Friend,

Editor of Creative Development, *Vanity Fair*

Location: *Vanity Fair* offices,
Condé Nast Building, 4 Times Square,
New York, New York

**G.B.: What is your role at *Vanity Fair*:**

D.F.: My title is Editor of Creative Development, so what that means is that I do special projects for the magazine: investigative pieces, photographic portfolios, a variety of stories that I edit or write and then I concentrate most of my energies on projects outside of the magazine – books, exhibitions. So I’ve become somewhat of a resident historian for the old *Vanity Fair*, which was from 1913 to 1936, and its suspended publication for 47 years and now it is back again starting again in 1983 in its current incarnation, so we are in our 26th year, as a re-launched monthly magazine. So I do special things.

**G.B.: And what initially attracted you to work for the magazine?**
D.F.: I started eleven years ago next week. Um, it was a … I was attracted by Graydon Carter as the editor. I have known him for almost twenty years. A strong editor’s voice brings a magazine personality and I knew that here was a magazine with a voice. So that Fortune magazine in the 40s, Time magazine in the 30s, Life magazine in the 50s, under Ed Thomson. Rolling Stone under Jann Wenner in the 70s, Esquire in the 60s - these were all men magazines that had a voice and so I was attracted by this idea that a strong top editor was saying something. And I like working with Graydon, I worked with him at Life magazine – he was a writer and I was a reporter in the mid 1980s.

The second thing that attracted me is that it was one of the top magazines in the country in terms of buzz and in terms of people gravitating to it and caring about it. And, they had to have it, they had to go to the newsstand to get it, or open their mailbox and get it – it was an addiction. When I was at Life magazine, where I worked for 19 years before coming here, one of the editors there, Jim Gaines, who ran Time, People, and Life – the only editor ever to edit all three of those magazines, wanted the magazine to turn weekly, Life at that time, because he said, ‘it is hard to get addicted to a monthly drug’. You want to be addicted. But I think that in this era now, so I’ve joined 11 years ago, but even in the era, there was so much information that people preferred their drug to only come once a month because it allowed you to really sink into the long form journalism.
Third I think is that at *Vanity Fair*, I could have my own turf. And, people seemed to be having fun here. I mean, Graydon has a great sense of humor, and *Vanity Fair* is in that wonderful highest echelon of the magazine business. A really celebrated magazine that people were reading and I would go, soon thereafter, I didn’t realize this at the time, but anything you would write, everybody was talking about them – not everybody, but the right people in the culture, the bright people in the culture were taking notice of what you were doing and so you were speaking to a certain set – in the same way that the “smart” magazines in the teens, 20s and 30s were appealing to a certain establishment culture, but also a bohemian culture, and also a culture that was in the know, had to remain in the know in order to have any influence on the cultural conversation.

G.B. Do you think that this readership has changed, from the “right” people you were referring to, to those who read the magazine now?

D.F.: Yes, I think it has. I think it has become more male – I don’t know if that is true, but I think it is – more male. As the world got more serious in 2001, we have gotten to be this balance of high and low that, well we receive a number of awards for our serious journalism. We have brought people on board who are more serious writers and editors. And I think we are responded to the world. *Vanity Fair* in 1936 was a magazine that was a little bit too frivolous for the times, too glib for the times. Yes, Hitler was covered, yes world affairs were covered, but there wasn’t this sense of impending doom – and there wasn’t a sense of economic collapse in a realistic way in as much as it should in the 1930s, and so it was folded into *Vogue* in 1936.
We are now similarly, more than two decades later, after attacks in 2001 on New York and Washington, there is a sense that we needed to respond to the needs of the culture and also propel the conversation. So Graydon Carter’s editor letters which began in earnest in 2002 – Graydon was one of the earliest and most vocal editors against the War in Iraq, while many in the media, print, electronic, and television, were buying this lock, stock, and barrel, we were printing James Wolcott’s critiques of the Bush Administration and the rest of the press, on the other side we were printing Christopher Hitchen’s support of the war effort, and we were doing pretty positive pieces about the Bush administration in Afghanistan, Secretary Rumsfeld, and yet Graydon’s letters were really raising a red flag. He was really among the earliest to go against the war. So we were trying in that way to be opinion makers to shape the dialogue, and to shape the dialogue among a certain set of people that then resonates out into the culture.

**G.B. How would you finish this sentence, ‘Vanity Fair is an expert on …’ With regard to the credibility that the magazine espouses…**

D.F.: You know, we are experts in allowing our individual voices to roam, to speak out in their own individual way. So the photographers, writers, illustrators, and editors, are all experts in all these different fields across the culture. So really only – the brand is really a way of having all these different voices speaking out and it has a certain cachet. If there is anything that we are really experts in, it is culture – high and low – Hollywood, and power. Whether it would be in the business sphere, personality sphere, world affairs. We also try to look beyond the horizon – you are not going to find something in the magazine that happened two months ago.
We have people who just know what is happening, who know what is coming down the pike, and they can see exactly what is coming right over the horizon – the early warning, whether it be fashion, literature, movies. These are impressions that we are trying to share with the reader so that the reader is in the know.

G.B. How does the content come each month? Is it the editors who approach the contributors, or is it the contributors who approach the editors?

D.F.: There is a big block of contributing editors, and so they send in ideas every six weeks and then Graydon hears things. So it is the photographers, the illustrators, the writers, the editors – everybody is throwing things to Graydon and he is the one who hears these conversations and then he decides what we should do. It is all channeled through one vision – Graydon’s vision and what we should do. It is an amazing and uncanny notion of a radar of what is just about to break.

G.B. I am doing a multi-method approach to my survey. Focus groups – reacted to the covers of all of the magazines – “aspirational journalism” – Is this something that you take into consideration when you are putting together an issue? This was something that I hadn’t predicted when I started this project, but this notion of ‘aspirations’ kept coming up.

D.F.: How old were the people you had in your focus groups?
G.B. Mid-to-late-twenties. So, pretty young.

D.F.: So, they have aspirations.

G.B.: Right, and so they are looking to publications like *Vanity Fair*, to help them direct those aspirations.

D.F.: No one here is in their twenties.

G.B: Right.

D.F.: You know, these are pretty established journalists. I mean some of those on the web are up-and-coming, journalists … But that term “aspirational”, means nothing. I mean it means something to advertisers.

There are magazines like *Architectural Digest, Gourmet, Travel and Leisure*, in this magazine company, *Glamour* I guess, that appeal to people’s aspirations as a mandate. But that’s not a conscious thing. And I am very leery of focus groups. You are only reaffirming things that you already know. It usually only helps on the extreme – because you usually already know
innately what they are telling you – I am not a big fan of the expense it takes to do focus
groups.

G.B. In terms of the advertisers, do you go to them? Do they come to you? Do you seek
out specific advertisers for the magazine?

D.F.: Well, you’d have to talk to the advertising people. We keep very separate.

G.B. So the editorial and business sides are quite separate.

D.F. But I mean in this economy it is both – advertisers – it is give and take. Advertisers with
Vanity Fair want to be peers with things – because their peers read Vanity Fair. But in this
economy we are hustling for ad pages like everybody us.

G.B. I don’t want to take much more of your time, but just to finish, where do you see the
magazine in two years – given that everything is evolving so rapidly in this business.

D.F.: You know, I think that the website – which Graydon likes to say is the “the magazine’s
more fun, younger sibling.” so I see the website continually evolving. It evolves every week,
with another fun way to do business and get this great dialogue between you and the reader.
The magazine will also cover the economy more, and politics more, because it has to, because it is a global economy. It will cover the world more/ I see us having to take a balance between the glamorous and the political. I see us navigating how to balance the glamorous and the profound – with the substance. But, always what we are doing is telling stories, that won’t change. We will continue to have narratives and we will continue to study power, the fall from power, and we will study wealth and how it helps or undermines people in culture. We want to look at culture – and continue to tell people why it is that it delights us – art, movies, literature, the web, humor. I see us continuing to let our people be auteurs – let them have their own voice.

It is not like we are sitting around saying we want to … We are just trying to tell good stories, delight ourselves and other people, like us. We are just telling stories – that is what cavemen did, troubadours did, that is what I got into the business to do – to tell stories and try to affect change – and so I am doing both of these things.
April 3, 2009

Interview with Michael Hainey, Deputy Editor, GQ

Location: Phone Interview

G.B. Can you explain your role at GQ?

M.H. I manage the staff day to day and am responsible for helping execute Jim Nelson’s vision – basically I think of myself as the center of the wheel.

G.B. According to you, who is the GQ reader?

M.H. The GQ reader is curious about the world, seeking to make themselves the best they can be. GQ is not simply a “fashion magazine” but a magazine about style and intelligence. Readers are asking themselves ‘how do I live smarter in this world?’ and GQ presents to them ideas they need to know about to engage life in the fullest. The magazine helps direct people – it leads you to where you need to be going, what you should know about.

It is like being invited to a great dinner party — when you walk in, you have no idea who you will be seated with but at the end of the evening you’ve been part of an unforgettable dialogue.
that’s broadened you and made you more curious about the world. And more confident of yourself.

**G.B. How would you finish this sentence, “GQ is an expert on…”**

M.H. GQ is an expert on how to live an intelligent life. I think we are an expert on how to enjoy the world. We have to have our antenna up all the time. We are telling readers what we think they need to think about – how to be engaged in the cultural moment.

**G.B. For my focus groups, I presented participants with GQ’s “Best of the Beltway” political articles and their accompanying cover. I noticed that many of these political articles were not featured on the cover – why is that?**

M.H. Do I wish that some of our fantastic political articles could appear on the cover? Yes – but I am also a realist and I know that some of our other stories have a broader appeal. And at the end of the day, we need to sell copies on the newsstand.

You want someone of the moment and if you add a layer of sex and sizzle, it sells.

**G.B. Can you speak to the women you feature on the cover of GQ?**

M.H. Never underestimate the power of having a great story — alongside a beautiful woman dressed in a sexy manner.
Our Jennifer Aniston issue [January 2009] was the top selling issue in 10 years.

**G.B. Where do you see the magazine in two years?**

M.H. In two years I think *GQ* will be even stronger than it is now. We have worked hard over the past 5 years to re-position *GQ*; to bring in a new generation of readers. And maintain our very loyal base of readers. We’ve succeeded. Our circulation has grown over the past five years. Not an easy thing to do in these times. But people respond to quality. And *GQ* is synonymous with quality.

Two years from now, readers are still going to want to know how to navigate this world, and *GQ* can help with that.
April 3, 2009
Interview with Tom Florio,
Publisher, *Vogue*

Location: Phone Interview

**G.B. Can you explain your role at Vogue?**

T.F. I am the publishing director of *Vogue, Teen Vogue,* and *Men’s Vogue* – what the publishing director does is that they are responsible for the advertising and marketing, which is where the magazine drives the majority of their revenue.

**G.B. How long have you been with Vogue?**

T.F. I have been with Condé Nast for 25 years. *Vogue* is a Condé Nast property, and I have been with *Vogue* for 8 years.

**G.B. Where were you prior to being at Vogue?**

Well, I launched *Condé Nast Traveler.* I worked on the launch team of *Vanity Fair*; I was President of *The New Yorker* for five years; I was the publisher for *GQ.*
G.B. What exactly attracted you to want to work for Vogue?

T.F. The owner of the company at the time wanted me to run it. *Vogue* is the largest profit-producing magazine – it is our biggest and most important property.

T.F. Since I’ve worked for all the magazines you are studying, let me explain each of them. First let’s talk about *Vogue* since I am here now.

G.B. I had read a quote by you in a 2006 *Advertising Age* article, where you referenced ‘The *Vogue* Capability Study’, could you elaborate a bit on that?

T.F. Well, it might be more helpful for you if you explain your thesis to me – what are you studying exactly?

G.B. It is for my Master’s thesis at Georgetown and I am looking at how three magazines at Condé Nast, *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *GQ*, shape...

T.F. I have worked at all of them.

G.B. Which is perfect. So, I am looking at how the journalists who write for these magazines can be considered to be public intellectuals in the manner in which they shape public discourse in the mainstream media/cultural markets.
T.F. Okay, so do you want me to maybe speak directly to that, or do you want me to go through these questions?

G.B. If you could speak to that, that would be great – especially given your experiences with the magazine.

T.F. Let me start with *Vogue* because it is the easiest, and because I am here.

Fashion magazines basically follow the runway and then use their big advertisers to tell the story - that is not what *Vogue* does. *Vogue* is a 120 year old magazine that really uses fashion as an expression of culture and there are three driving principals of *Vogue*:

1- Visual genius because the guy who started *Vogue*, Condé Nast, at that time was a techie. Condé Nast was developing all these ways to do photography and he was actually the first person to develop the four way … The part of *Vogue* that is ultimately so influential is that it puts the woman at the center of the culture, not the center of the story. If you look back historically, putting Lee Miller on the cover during WWII, having her photographed from the [war] front, and they were publishing those pictures in *Vogue*, or Coretta Scott King during the Civil Rights Movement was covered in *Vogue*, like Shirley Chisholm was, so you know this idea that the woman is the driving force of the culture 120 years ago was a pretty big idea.
2- Optimism – the idea of *Vogue* is kind of travels the world and she sees all these beautiful things and then presents it with an optimistic eye. It is not about a woman’s deficiencies, it is about her dreams. So the essence of *Vogue* initially was to give a woman her best essence of self – give her permission to dream, but not dream of herself in the context of a man, but dream of herself with her own female powerbase. Fashion became very much a part of this because that is how she expressed herself. So, that is the DNA of *Vogue*.

Over time what happened, is the most important writers and photographers of the time, in the 1920s, the 1940s, resembled what *The New Yorker* is – you had some of the best writers – John Updike was published in *Vogue*, Truman Capote – all of these great writers were being published in *Vogue*, as were all the great photographers of the time. So, what that does is it builds a customer base, a reader base on a magazine and the readers of the magazine is ultimately the power base of the magazine, because those are the people you can activate. So editors that have a readership that either are change agents or have enough critical mass that you can activate the culture, become very important editors or contributors to the culture. In the case of *Vogue* today, 1 out of every 10 American women, sees *Vogue* every month. We have 10.6 million readers.

That is why an editor like Anna Wintour is so important, because if she likes an idea and covers it in the magazine, or if she has a point of view, if there is a change in the value system,
what we did just recently by putting Michelle Obama on the cover, that was much more than putting the first First Lady who is Black and putting her on the cover, that was also a message about women of substance, women of the people, women who are substantial care about the way they look and present themselves to the world. They are not frivolous or silly, they are a serious woman, they

So that is why someone like Anna, or Grace Coddington is such a force is.

The Fusion Theory is how ideas move through a culture. There are change agents and there are masses. The interesting thing about Vogue as a brand is that it has both the change agents, and the masses in the same environment so that is why it is able to ignite an idea. Whereas, with a book like The New Yorker is more about the change agents. They have an intellectual, opinion-forming, move people in the legal system, move people in Washington, move industry leaders, with an intellectual rigor and it will find its way to the masses, whereas with a book like Vogue, it has both.

Now, Vanity Fair, it presented what was new and then gave you a new take on what was known. It’s ability to present a new idea in a culture was important but what I think it’s real power comes from, and Graydon’s power comes from is its ability to give you an insight into something that is already part of the culture – whether it is a article about terrorism or a not so important piece about hedge-fund managers, but it takes something that is in popular culture
and gives you a spin on it – offering a new point of view that is insightful. That is also a magazine that I think is more about change agents as well.

So, for GQ - The formula of GQ is different now and I worked for years beside Art Cooper who really invented the GQ that most people think of. What is interesting about GQ is that its brilliance originally was that it was a magazine for men who weren’t privileged, who didn’t grow up with a silver spoon, who didn’t come from the intellectual elite, with the private schools – but, who were smart, upwardly mobile, getting out of school with their degree and their good first job, and they cared very much about transcending social strata. So GQ was a magazine about how to live this life and it wasn’t just about your clothes, it was about a piece of writing, and a writer you should know about, it was about who you should know about – it was about all the things that someone who was educated but not necessarily someone one was exposed and culturally enriched to have exposure to new things – to live a life of a gentleman – and what it meant to be a gentleman. As a result the magazine was incredibly powerful, especially as an advertising vehicle. For these people who are upwardly mobile, and they were making a good living – they weren’t off a trust fund, they were using their own money. And the way they knew they were doing well was that upward mobility – so their consumption. Because consumption is so much a part of our value system – keep up with the Jones, the American dream, the articles and the advertising in those issues, put in front of a readership, really drove consumption. And then there is this whole sensibility about who this GQ guy was, and basically, he was this guy – like this guy everybody wanted to be – which is someone who
is individual, but desired by the group. You know, men like to see themselves as the rugged individualist – like the Marlboro man, but ultimately they have a sense of belonging. And the way men show each other what group they belong to, is through mastery, and if you think about it, think of any kind of guy you know – it is the clubs you belong to, the teams you’re on, it is mastery – and that is how men show what group they belong to. But they want to be seen as the individual that everyone wants to be.

So GQ was this magazine that was this opportunity to transcend and move into a higher opportunity in life, and live a richer and better life – it was the American dream – and that is where its influence came from ultimately.

**G.B. Now, in terms of advertisers, do you pursue them or do they come to you?**

We are always pursuing advertisers at *Vogue* and the reason why we are so successful is because we started marketing *Vogue* as a brand, not just a magazine, about five years ago. Our platforms are broad, our greatest asset is that we have 10 million readers and we have this way of moving the culture, so when we create our platforms, we talk to advertisers about advertising in our magazine and how that works online, and then *Vogue TV*, we talk to them about retail opportunities, and we create these elaborate marketing books because the reason we have to do that is because our competitors – magazines like *Elle* and *Harper’s Bazaar*, are much more likely to trade off their editorial content for big ad budgets. While it is not always
spoken, but sometimes it is, there are these marginal brands that aren’t necessarily that good, but get a ton of editorial in these magazines because they advertise.

We don’t do that and because we don’t do that it is important for us to communicate the value proposition to our readers – let them know why they are worth more – the relationship between the editorial and the magazine, and how that elevates their ad value.

The price of Vogue is also probably in many cases 50-80% more than the other magazines because they discount their rate – where we don’t. So, we are forever pursuing and working with our advertisers on very elaborate marketing programs. But we drive the majority of the revenue of the industry. And, because we are such an old brand, these relationships have been around for awhile – and they are constantly evolving.

Things are constantly changing and we are much a part implementing that change as anyone. The CFDA Fashion Fund, which is what the television show “Project Runway” is based on, is initiated by Vogue, whereby it is a contest, with real designers that have been working for at least two years, and then they have the opportunity to win an award that Vogue and a group of other people in the fashion industry, pick. If you go back a bit, back 5 years, everyone of these designers has emerged with a relatively major force. Thakoon [Panichgul] is now doing Target and his Gap shirt – and we introduced him to the Gap and Target. Jason Wu, who is now dressing Ms. Obama, was one of our finalists last year and we introduced the two of them. All
of our relationships evolve as much off the pages as they do on the pages in the magazine. So, when we are pursuing our business and advertising arrangements, we are coming at it from ‘inside the industry’, as opposed to saying “by a page in our magazine and you’ll get this many editorial credits at 50% off”.
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