



MEDIA & POP CULTURE

When is a teen magazine not a teen magazine?

Bonny Norton

The popularity of teen magazines, as well as the release of several new teen publications in the past few years, may come as a surprise to some educators. Shared readership of the leading teen magazines, including giants *Seventeen*, *YM*, and *Teen* is assessed at well over 10 million. With cover prices of approximately US\$4 per issue, monthly revenues for these publications are in the multimillion dollar range. Any reading material that attracts this kind of expenditure of both leisure time and money on the part of young readers should be of interest to educators.

When my own 14-year-old daughter started buying glossy teen magazines, I began to peruse the research on them. I found that this research has been the subject of much debate and controversy and that perspectives on teen magazines have changed over time. For example, in her initial analysis of publications like *Jackie*, McRobbie (1991) made the argument that teen magazines are forms of social control that create limited and constrained options for young women. Later, however, McRobbie (1994) provided a more textured analysis, highlighting the spaces for negotiation within such magazines. Such nuances are characteristic of other research with teen magazines. Currie (1999), for example, noted the contradictory messages of teen magazines, which on the one hand encourage girls to make themselves desirable for boys, but on the other encourage girls to "be yourself." These contradictory messages, Currie argued, resonate

with the lived experiences of being a girl in a patriarchal culture.

With the jury still out, it was with much relief that I came across two teen magazines that seemed to offer broader perspectives on the lives of young women than other teen magazines I had encountered. One, *Teen Voices*, is American, and the other, *Reluctant Hero*, is Canadian (neither uses dates on their issues). Significantly, it was not easy to track either one down, and I wondered to what extent teenage girls might be able to access these alternative teen magazines. For this reason, I would like to bring them to the attention of this column's readers, share my discussions with their two editors, and offer a reflective comment on conceptions of identity in these and other teen magazines.

Teen Voices

Teen Voices, with a readership of 75,000, is published quarterly by the nonprofit organization Women Express, Inc., located in Boston and San Francisco. *Teen Voices* also has an Internet magazine, *Teen Voices Online*, found at <http://www.teenvoices.com>; it has 11,000 hits per month. A cofounder of Women Express in 1988, Alison Amoroso has been the editor-in-chief of *Teen Voices* for the past 10 years. The mandate of *Teen Voices* is described in the magazine as follows:

Teen Voices is an interactive, educational forum that challenges media images of women and serves as a vehicle of change, improving young women's social and economic status.

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Teen Voices provides an intelligent alternative to glitzy, gossipy, fashion-oriented publications that too often exploit the insecurities of their young audience. *Teen Voices* is the premier national magazine written by young women, publishing their authentic voices. *Teen Voices* encourages expression—not suppression—it honors the sensibilities, ideals, hopes, fears, anger, joy, and insights of teenage and young adult women.

In the course of my research, I was interested to discover that Amoroso received an M.Ed. from the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 1990 and has spent many years working with adolescents in Massachusetts and North Carolina. I was intrigued by the role she played as editor of *Teen Voices*. In a recent e-mail exchange with Amoroso, she responded to the following questions.

BN: To what extent did your graduate studies in education prepare you for your work with *Teen Voices*?

AA: My most important preparation was my certificate in human development at Duke University during my undergrad years, as well as my research there. My Harvard education was more centered around counseling. It prepared me to work with the families, communities, and government services of our teen editorial board and to supervise my staff, in addition to increasing my understanding of evaluating programs.

BN: You have said that *Teen Voices* gives young women the opportunity to explore issues that are overlooked by commercial publications. Can you provide examples of these issues?

AA: Examples include feminism, non-traditional careers, tracking in schools, identity, and assertiveness in romantic relationships. We also address sexual abuse, communication with family members, nutrition, media literacy,

anger management, aggression against women, objectification, and legal issues that teens have to face. Virtually every feature we do is completely different from commercial mags.

BN: How do you respond to letters from readers who say that the magazine is too “preachy” and focuses too much on the “hard points of life”?

AA: Readers have rarely ever said this. We’ve been publishing for over 11 years, and I don’t recall this criticism more than once or so. It’s mostly adults who say we focus on the hard points. I think it’s because they don’t want to deal with the fact that teen women are hurt in school, at home, in their community. We print what is sent, and teens want a place to share and learn from each other. The most recurring response we get from teens is “Please print this. I wanted to write it so other teens don’t have to go through what I have been through, and so they know they’re not alone.” These are exactly the reasons why we started *Teen Voices*; our training and experience convinced us that this forum would cut down on alienation, so common among teen girls, and provide good information in a helpful way, instead of through an uninspiring public health brochure. So on the contrary, we are not viewed as preachy and feel we are successful in reaching teen women with important information that they can use to help themselves, in a developmentally appropriate format.

BN: I know that one of the goals of your team is to see the readership expand from 75,000 to 1 million readers. What challenges do you anticipate as you seek to achieve this goal?

AA: None at all. Once we have capital, we know the interest is out

there. We have a renewal rate almost double what commercial magazines have. It’s not hard to increase your circulation when you can print enough magazines. The others are disingenuous; they claim huge circulation numbers, but they send free magazines to doctor and dentist offices and hair salons that are just glanced through. Our readers not only read all of *Teen Voices*, they keep them.

Readership of magazines such as *Seventeen* is about 3 minutes; our readers keep them for years.

BN: Are there any other comments you would like to make to readers of the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*?

AA: Teen women are naturally drawn to writing as a catharsis. We invite you to use *Teen Voices* in your practice. That is why we created it. Here are some effective practices we’ve heard from practitioners: Use it in groups to begin dialogue to show young women you understand and care about their issues, particularly that of race; use it so that girls can find commonalities among themselves; use it to show a girl she has worth—send her writing or art in with your explanation of why being published will help her; give it as a termination present; use it with a student who will not talk—invite her to react in writing or art to what she reads; use it to inspire her to write; use it to assess her literacy level; use it to teach literacy as it is developmentally appropriate for an older teen, yet easy to read at a low literacy level.

Reluctant Hero

Begun in 1997, *Reluctant Hero* is a Canadian publication with a circulation of 10,000. It is an ad-free teen magazine, published quarterly out

of Toronto and financially supported by newsstand and subscription sales. Like *Teen Voices*, it has its own Web site at <http://www.reluctanthero.com>.

The title *Reluctant Hero* was inspired by the work of Joseph Campbell, a mythologist who believed that we are the heroes in our own life journeys. As the magazine stated,

along the way to finding out who you are and who you are to become, you might be reluctant to heed your intuition or to follow your passion. Hopefully, by learning more about each other and ourselves, we will not hesitate to shape our lives for adventure. (vol. 2, no.1, p. 1)

The person who has been most associated with *Reluctant Hero* since its inception is Sharlene Azam, editor of a recently published collection of personal stories by young women across Canada (Azam, 2001). Azam started *Reluctant Hero* after writing a booklet for Save the Children Canada called "A Girl's Right to Development" which was presented at the 1995 United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing, China. During the research for her booklet, Azam learned about the difficulties that girls in both developed and developing countries face. After visiting high schools to talk to girls about what they read and what influences they considered most important, Azam conceived the idea of starting a magazine by girls and for girls. The first issue was embraced by girls, parents, and the media, which enabled the magazine to continue publishing. In a recent electronic interview, Azam responded to the following questions.

BN: Could you give *JAAL* readers some background on the founding of *Reluctant Hero*, its audience, its mandate, and its current operation?

SA: The audience is primarily young women 12 to 16, but we seem to

have parents, brothers, and girls who are 18 and 19 who read the magazine. The mandate is to provide a place for girls to express themselves freely. Every issue has 50 different young women involved from various high schools across Canada. They shape the editorial line and write the stories. Since we are free of advertising and the pressures that come with it, we can publish anything we like.

BN: To what extent do you think the magazine has made a difference in the lives of young women?

SA: I think it's helped young women feel less isolated with their problems. It's nice to know you are not the only one dealing with bullies or acne. I think it's also served as a point of departure for conversations that have helped parents, teachers, and girls better understand themselves and what it's like to be a teenage girl today. I'm also really happy to know that the magazine has influenced the public discourse. I regularly receive calls from the media requesting writers from the mag to talk about their stories or to comment on current events. The media used to believe that young people were not smart enough, or thoughtful enough, or articulate enough to talk about issues; I believe we've had a hand in changing that.

BN: Could you describe some of the joys and frustrations of serving as editor of a progressive magazine for young women?

SA: We've reached a point where we need to grow in order to survive. Yet, as a small magazine we can't afford to advertise, so we have to rely on word-of-mouth and media coverage. The best thing about being a publisher is reading the messages and letters from girls about the impact that certain stories have had or just

how nice it is that we exist alongside of *Seventeen* and *YM*. Plus, it's a wonderful feeling to know that you can help young women feel good—because they're "published writers," or because they've come to some understanding about their own experiences by reading the mag.

Webzines

While *Teen Voices* and *Reluctant Hero* have provided teenage girls with a wider range of choices in the teen magazine literature, Webzines have become the new kid on the block. Webzines are Web sites covering a wide range of interests common to teenage girls—in effect, teen magazines on the Web.

In conducting my research on teen magazines, I came across an interesting article in *Reluctant Hero* (vol. 2, no. 2, p. 36) written by a 15-year-old, Giselle DeGrandis, who rated a number of Webzines that are becoming increasingly popular among young women. For those educators who are not familiar with these Webzines, I present Giselle's comments on those that she rates most highly as creative, informative, and interactive.

(i). *Brillo Magazine* (<http://www.virago-net.com/brillo>): A webzine that's funny, frank and unabashedly feminist.

(ii). *gURL* (<http://www.gurl.com>): Just one visit to *gURL* will have you hooked, guaranteed.

(iii). *Just SPORTS for women* (<http://www.justwomen.com>): This Web site is a haven for the sports enthusiast!

On Giselle's recommendation, I visited these sites and found them interesting and innovative. In *Brillo*, described as "extra abrasive," I read an informative article by James Peterson on "Ebonics, self-determination, and political correctness." The Webzine *gURL* had a wide variety of topics, but I was drawn in particular to a site called "Being yourself resources," which includes references to other