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“Tons of Useful Stuff”: Defining Wellness in Popular Magazines

In our efforts to attain and preserve our health and wellness[1], we rely on our health care providers as sources of expert knowledge; but we also try to acquire as much expertise as we can on our own through the consumption of various media in the popular culture. In this study, I will focus on one such source, the health and wellness magazine. Although the internet is becoming increasingly central to our experience of culture, one reason why it has not yet supplanted the health and wellness magazines may be that the internet contains so much information that it is too much—vast and unstructured—whereas magazines still offer one of their original functions, as digests that organize and filter information for us. So far, they are more manageable both physically (we can read them on the train or the elliptical trainer) and cognitively. Examining a sample of such publications for male and female audiences—*Self, Bicycling,* and *Men's Health*—reveals a variety of expectations and desires at work in the production and consumption of these texts. These products of popular culture are sites where the experience of “health” and “wellness” is as much negotiated as simply imposed, complicating the range of available meanings for these terms in ways which are sometimes problematic, and sometimes actually beneficial.

The overt message in these wellness publications is that striving to be their best will free readers from anxiety, and will open the door to more power—agency, control, influence—in the relationship with self and community. However, scholarly critique is wary of this message, and has struggled to focus on the potential of wellness texts to be read positively, tending instead to emphasize the working of oppressive forces. Smith Maguire finds that the discourse of health/wellness and self-improvement is part of a tension in society to promote, on the one hand, individual empowerment through greater "medical self-competence" and, on the other, "personal responsibility for risk reduction" wherein the individual acts unconsciously to do the state's work for it. Responsibility becomes discipline and docility, and the institutional workings of power go unexamined (453). Dworkin and Messner similarly argue that health and wellness texts promote "a radical turning inward of agency toward the goal of transformation of one's own body, in contrast to a turning outward to mobilize for collective action" (352). Critical observers agree that wellness magazines portray the body as a thing that can, and therefore must, be manipulated to appear and behave in certain ways which promote consumption—of products by readers, of women's bodies by the male gaze. Bartky's influential Foucauldian study describes the way in which society's "disciplinary power," though "dispersed and anonymous" operates to control its members, specifically women:

> The disciplinary techniques through which the 'docile bodies' of women are constructed aim at a regulation that is perpetual and exhaustive—a regulation of the body's size and contours, its appetite, posture, gestures and general comportment in space, and the appearance of each of its individual parts. (132-32)

Helstein argues that by taking on the authority to define what is "best" in terms of what is most healthy and well, the expert advice we consume acts to highlight what is currently *not* well in our lives, undermining our efforts towards greater freedom, so that "what you are right now becomes the abnormal…emancipation is not enabling or subversive in this instance, but rather limiting" (289-90). Thus, in such analyses, the seemingly benign goals of self-improvement espoused by wellness magazines take on profoundly sinister undertones.

But: I want to suggest that as much as wellness magazines, as part of a larger trend in the media generally, make health information more and more available, and more a subject of anxiety and concern, they can also work to shift our awareness in beneficial ways, to act as tools that we can actively use on our own behalf. As Hardin, Lynn, and Walsdorf remind us, "although texts may have a dominant…ideology, that ideology may not be entirely accepted by audiences…[T]o be popular, texts *must* be polysemic" (108). The publishers of wellness magazines have multiple motives, some conscious, some not, in producing these texts, which are in turn open to multiple readings and uses by consumers; readers are in some ways constructed by texts, but they can also have a productive, negotiatory relationship with texts to construct new and useful meanings. Thus, though our vigilant pursuit of health information may fuel an obsessive-compulsive mix of hypochondria and consumerism, it may also result in our acquiring a great deal of expertise ourselves; sooner or later we will learn something, and acquire power from that knowledge.

Moreover, previous critiques have carefully explored how wellness magazines, especially for women, provoke self-absorbed, distracting anxiety by conflating goals of bodily self-improvement and self-discipline with questions of aesthetics, sexuality, and consumerism. I want now to suggest that in addition to fraught concern and obsession with how the female body looks and functions, readers of both sexes are also led to consider how wellness of the body is related to identity, one's relationship to self and others, in *positive* ways. Though there certainly are problems with how our physical and social wellness is constructed in these publications, we should not underestimate these texts' polysemic potential to allow readers to glean helpful and productive knowledge from their pages.

Out of the many wellness-themed magazines available, I have chosen to focus here on three of the best-selling publications, each of which claims to offer essential guidance for living a healthy life, including information on training, nutrition and weight loss/management, and emotional, social, and sexual fulfillment: *Self* (for women), *Bicycling* (for both sexes, though the audience is mostly male), and *Men's Health* (for men, although enough women read it to have prompted the creation, Adam's rib-like, of *Women's Health*). These three magazines tend to be more substantial than others in their market, in terms of the ratio of editorial content to advertising; I also confess to a personal bias as I have been reading them—and following some of their advice—for many years. In fact, it is my own fascination with these magazines, and the vision of wellness they promote, that has led me to ask the key questions of this study: how do these publications construct themselves and their audiences? What definitions of health and wellness are they operating with? How do these publications fuel—and satisfy—our anxiety about the wellness of our bodies as physical and social entities?

According to the media kits found on the websites of their respective publishers, the target audiences for *Self* (Condé Nast), *Bicycling*, and *Men's*

Health (Rodale), share one common characteristic, which is the socio-economic status to allow them to invest time and—crucially—money in their health and wellness. As *Bicycling*'s publishers put it in their mission statement, these magazines "connect…with millions of active, affluent professionals" ("Media Kit—*Bicycling*") whose target age ranges from the mid 20s to late 30s/mid 40s, and whose median household income is in the mid 80s (*Self:* $85,671; *Bicycling:* $81, 352; *Men's Health*: $80, 941). These magazines have the potential to influence the thoughts and behaviors of very large numbers of readers; for example, *Men's Health* claims to be the "largest men's lifestyle magazine in the world with a global reach of 22 million in 42 editions serving 44 countries" and nearly 12 million readers in the US market alone ("Media Kit – *Men's Health*"). The other publications vary in the size of their readerships—*Self* claims 6.1 million readers, and *Bicycling*, with its more specific interests, reports a readership of only 1.6 million issues ("Media Kit—*Self, Bicycling").* All of these magazines have a reach beyond their sales, as the publications tend to circulate amongst additional readers through shared use in book stores, libraries, gyms, or doctors' offices.

In describing the missions of the respective magazines, their publishers place an overt emphasis on the shared values of magazine and readers, and on the magazine's utility in helping readers clarify and reach their full potential. *Self* identifies itself as "a resource for the woman who wants to stay informed, get inspired, grow, and achieve her personal goals" ("Media Kit—*Self*"); *Men's Health* is "for men who want greater control over the physical, mental, and emotional lives. We give men the tools they need to make their lives better" ("Media Kit – *Men's Health*"); *Bicycling*'s mission is to provide a "unique combination of travel, gear, fitness, style and award-winning stories….[which] brings the sport to life for passionate readers who take us along for every ride" ("Media Kit—*Bicycling*"). Inside the magazines, the information we need in order to achieve this vision of wellness is plentiful, and bolstered by research and extensive use of sources: a mix of academic researchers, nutritionists, personal trainers, or life coaches—often ones who have services, books, or products for sale. No matter the topics covered or the sources consulted, for every bit of advice we also receive information about the apparatus to make it happen. In all of these magazines, and the many others like them, there is a huge focus on "cutting-edge *gear"* ("Media Kit – *Men's Health*"): makeup, clothes, fitness apps for the smart phone, diet foods; special bicycle clothes, different kinds of bikes, pedals, shoes, tools, parts; barbecues, stereo equipment, baseball bats. If we were to look at more "alternative" publications like *Natural Health* or *Yoga Journal,* we would find their pages full of articles and ads promoting vitamins, naturopathic remedies, eco-friendly clothes, yoga props, and décor items. Even the least commercial-seeming publications cannot escape the fact that they are vehicles for selling commodities; for readers, the message implicitly is that wellness is a condition that encompasses what *Bicycling* calls an "experiential lifestyle" involving many dimensions: doing good for one's self; perhaps doing good for one's community; and, undeniably, doing good for the economy by shopping.

From a distance, whether the publication is about fashion or fitness, the covers of most lifestyle magazines look very similar, reflecting a well-tested strategy of appealing to readers with attractive role-models whom we aspire to emulate, and exuberant, multi-colored text: how to achieve this, avoid that; how to gain or lose; revelations of fixes, secrets, and all that is new, fast, and easy. Within this proven template, each publication works to appeal to its particular readership. *Self*'s cover defines wellness as an involved process of modifying all aspects of one's physical and social life: its motto is "You at your best." The January 2010 cover exhorts readers to "make [this] your 'I did it!' year." They can learn how to "be a casual beauty" with "5-minute fixes" for dull, spotty skin; readers will learn "16 ways to sleep great!" and how to "spark up your sex life"—not in any particular order. Most importantly, the magazine will reveal "31 tiny tricks that peel off major pounds…sexy-stomach short-cuts…[and] the simple no-gym plan designed just for you."

The cover of *Bicycling*—the "World's Leading Bike Magazine"—clearly establishes that the magazine aims to supply an expert and highly-specific focus on the training and equipment for cycling. The January 2010 issue proclaims that we will "get a fast bike for less," and "save [our] ride in 8 easy fixes"; we will learn about "smart (& fun!) indoor training," and "the best ride in America." *Bicycling* magazine is well-designed to appeal to readers who are, or, importantly, *envision* themselves as, serious athletes for whom health and wellness are understood as synonymous with *training*: wellness, in this context, is not simply a general condition, but also includes an identity with a certain sub-culture whose members share interests, values, and definitions of status. Finally, *Men's Health* offers all manner of advice for achieving wellness in the form of "tons of useful stuff." This is a genial, general assertion which might appeal to a man who imagines himself as a "guy," for whom it would be unseemly to pursue wellness with any overt display of seriousness, but who is nevertheless very concerned about having an array of useful tools—skills, gear, attributes—ready to hand. In the case of the January 2010 issue, readers will "discover how strong [they] can be" in the new year, which involves lessons on "the new American diet," "Smart Choices—how to spot 'em, how to make 'em" and the "anatomy of a booty call (this is her brain on sex)."

From cover to contents, we can see that these different publications represent complicated, sometimes competing motives for pursuing health and wellness. For both readers and editors, wellness is not just this diet or that workout; rather, looking and being well depends on a combination of consumption and active practice, encompassing good nutrition, regular exercise or training, and a good relationship with oneself and others. It is in this combination of self- and other-focused interests that we can find both the harmful and beneficial functions of the wellness magazines: readers may, in part, be driven by insecurity and anxiety, but they also find inspiration and uplift from making real improvements in their own health, and in feeling that they are part of a larger movement for health in their society.

As we have seen, many commentators have focused on the negative, rather than the positive, reading of wellness magazines. For example, what has always attracted critique of wellness magazines, especially for women, is the equation they make, not very subtly, between health, slenderness, and beauty; in order to achieve health and wellness as defined by the magazines—and exemplified by their models' lean and toned physiques—readers must follow exacting regimes that are primarily designed to achieve weight loss, or at least prevent weight gain. Thus, in some women's wellness magazines—*Shape, Fitness*—eating and working out are rarely done simply for fun, for aesthetic, social, or physical gratification: the goal is to get prettier, which usually means getting *smaller*. The typical prescription, as exemplified in the January 2010 issue of *Fitness*, calls for a diet of 1500-1800 calories per day, and light, brief (30-45 minutes) workouts several days per week, combining aerobic activity and weight training. However, since the diet will leave most adult women ravenously hungry even at rest, the workouts cannot be very strenuous, which is actually preferable because readers fear "bulking up." Consequently, both diet and exercise recommendations fall short of current U.S. Health and Human Services and Centers for Disease Control guidelines for good health, which call for diets of at least 2000 calories per day, and 30-90 minutes of moderate activity most days of the week ("Dietary"; "Physical Activity and"; "Physical Activity: Key"). Women cannot make significant gains in strength using the lighter recommended weights (Heaner E8), and—most importantly—while the regimen will result in weight loss in the short term, it is a recipe for the kind of hunger and feelings of deprivation that undermine healthy habits for the long term.

That women continue to seek out such regimens, and that many (though not all) wellness magazines continue to offer them, has been taken as evidence that the publications are primarily instruments of oppression.[2] But as much as scholars (including this one) have delineated these negative aspects of wellness magazines, readers keep reading them. Rather than seeing all wellness magazines' recommendations as a capitulation to, or even sinister reinforcement of, oppressive social forces, perhaps the diet and exercise advice—in at least some publications—has some positive value for readers in supporting their efforts to improve their overall wellness, while also recognizing and accommodating the demands of their lives.

Self, for example, has in recent years tried to move away from the stringent caloric restriction endorsed by many other publications. The January 2010 "Food Lover's Diet" is not the typical set of calorie-controlled menus, but is instead a set of recommendations for eating less while eating better: "eat more, shed pounds, and love the results…no deprivation or strict calorie-counting required!" (91). Readers are encouraged to monitor portion sizes and choose 150-calorie snacks of whole-grain pita and hummus rather than chocolate bars (99). They are also encouraged to eat for nourishment and pleasure—but not distraction or self-medication. Readers are advised to "avoid eating in front of the TV," to "seek out a nonfood reward that inspires you," and to practice slower, mindful eating and self-reflection (99). That some foods are just too lovely to forego is accepted: "no food is off-limits; just think of your daily intake as a level scale—if you put something in, take something else out…Normal and overweight women who ate their most desired food daily were less inclined to devour it after two weeks" (92-102). Wellness almost always involves appearance and size in this genre of magazine; many readers do, indeed, want to get smaller. Consequently, *Self*'s diet advice is certainly meant not only to improve one's overall nutrition, but to result in "drop[ping] a size this month!" (91). Nevertheless, the advice here is also meant to "make eating right a lifelong habit" (104), and is part of the magazine's stated goal of helping readers to "achieve total well-being" ("Media Kit—*Self*").

Self's fitness advice is similarly meant to be one manageable component of an overall healthy—and complicated—lifestyle. *Self*'s fitness prescriptions tend not to depart too much from those of competing publications: the featured workouts are meant to tone and burn calories, not provide training in any particular set of skills. But while we can hope that readers will set more ambitious fitness goals for themselves, we must also note how the magazine's prescriptions are adapted to the constraints of readers' lives. *Self*'s advice focuses on the workout as a commitment to be regularly scheduled—necessary for readers whose lives are already over-scheduled with work and family obligations. The workouts are designed to be done anywhere, perhaps at the gym or the park, but also likely in the reader's home, and are meant to be done quickly and alone. Research in exercise motivation shows that people are less likely to stick with activities done for "extrinsic motives" such as appearance, and are more likely to stick with an activity if it is performed for "intrinsic motives" which combine a desire for health with a desire for challenge, competition, and social interaction (Kilpatrick et al., 87). Such activities—rock climbing, bicycling, soccer, ballet—also tend to take more than 30 minutes at a time, when the average amount of leisure time available for American adults is only 24 minutes per day, and women have less leisure time than men ("Measuring Leisure," 28-31). Moreover, even though exercising only for extrinsic motives such as weight loss or appearance "might be detrimental to exercise participation and mental health," women find it "challenging . . . to prioritize their own health and self-care needs" (Segar et al, 184). Many readers of *Self* would prefer to have more time to train, or even to play—but they may only have time to exercise, and the magazine's workout prescriptions are thus, if somewhat limited, do-able for anyone regardless of ability or schedule.

And *Self*, like the other magazines, also recognizes that readers have—and need—a mix of those extrinsic and intrinsic motivations for working out as part of their broader investment in wellness. Outside of the feature articles on the latest work-out regimen, readers are encouraged throughout the magazine to try new things, overcome psychological roadblocks to achieving their goals, and build connections with others: one former contestant on television's *The Biggest Loser* credits trainer Jillian Michaels with teaching her that "the one thing I ended up needing the most [was] a support system" ("Let Me Train You" 107). The magazine portrays itself as part of that support system, offering guidance in its pages, and the opportunity to participate in mutually-encouraging discussion groups on the "Community" page of the magazine's website. And readers become involved with activities in the real community as well as the virtual: they are regularly told about "How *Self* readers give back to their community" (December 2009), through simple efforts such as setting up a skills-swap with friends, to volunteering, to starting their own non-profit organizations (with information provided for readers who wish to contribute themselves). Readers of *Self* can read the magazine just for the diet, just for the workout, but they do not. As the magazine's construction implies, readers have multiple reasons for changing their diet, activity, and overall lifestyle, and dropping a dress size out of an internalized sense of societally-determined bodily discipline is only one of them.

The attitude towards wellness taken by *Bicycling* is similarly complex: being on the bike requires a certain commitment, but also becomes a literal and figurative focal point for a healthy lifestyle. As with the other magazines, readers of *Bicycling* care about their weight: each issue of the magazine certainly contains earnest items on optimal nutrition for training, taking for granted that readers will want both natural foods and the most scientifically cutting edge—artificially-engineered—forms of supplements, bars, gels, and drinks. The January 2010 issue advises readers on the difference between "active" and "lazy" calories (32), and profiles Scott Cutshall, who lost over 300 pounds through diet and—of course—bike rides of steadily increasing distance and intensity (46-53).

But the magazine's view of diet and nutrition is more accommodating than we see elsewhere in many wellness publications: the assumption is that readers like to play hard, that they can and ought to exercise clinical exactitude in their approach to "performance nutrition"—and for this effort, they are allowed to eat well, and occasionally plentifully. Until recently, *Bicycling* ran a regular item called "Because You Ride"; if one has worked hard, one has then earned a truly impressive quantity of treats. For example, to "replenish the 3360 calories [burned] riding for five hours at 14 mph" one could eat the equivalent of "seven Dunkin Donuts egg and cheese croissant sandwiches" (August 2007, 46). Not that one would follow through on this information—but the data contribute to the magazine's overall celebratory attitude towards the role of bicycling as part of a healthy and fulfilling lifestyle. In a similar vein, each issue features a profile of a particular riding experience, which includes recommendations for a route, the important sights worth stopping for, and, crucially, the best places to go for food and drink. For example, in January's article on cycling Santa Barbara, we learn where to get our flats fixed, and where we can get anything from natural food, to coffee and pastry, to beer (24). The magazine also regularly profiles chefs who discuss their combined love for cycling and cuisine; here Denver chef Jennifer Jasinski talks about mountain biking in Moab, and shares a recipe for cauliflower fuji apple soup (30) which calls for a stick of butter and four cups of milk—acceptable to readers, "because they ride." Instead of portraying treats as an indulgence for which one must do penance, as we often expect to see in fitness magazines, in *Bicycling* the relationship with food seems completely the opposite. Eating is less fraught with potential danger and can instead be, at the least, fuel, and even, simply, fun.

This approach to eating is inextricable from fitness, and obviously, in *Bicycling*, there is only one physical activity of interest: much of the magazine's content is concerned with how to ride better, and as much as possible, or—more realistically—as much as one can in the time available. In the January issue alone, Chris Carmichael (Lance Armstrong's trainer) considers indoor cycling classes as an alternative to riding outdoors (28); "FitChick" Selene Yeager offers "seven off-season tricks to give you an edge come spring" (26); we learn how to "ride all winter long by overcoming . . . common cold-weather obstacles" (43); and six pro cyclists offer their advice for staying "cycling-fit without pedaling a bike" over the winter (45). During the regular training season, a typical regimen for serious competitors will involve several workouts per week, involving 30-180 minutes of intervals, climbs, and "time-trial" rides of 20-40 kilometers ("Train for the Tour," August 2007). For many readers (who have the time), riding is not just exercise, not just a way to "torch calories," but is instead inseparable from challenge: riding to complete exhaustion, testing one's strength and fortitude, maybe getting quite dirty, doing hard work. For others, riding some, whatever little bit, is better than not riding at all.

But the magazine demonstrates that bicycling fulfills many other needs in readers' lives as well, as a means to commute, vacation, and build social ties and communities. In recent years, the magazine's "BikeTown" feature has focused on the use of bikes in African communities; where the government is unable to provide infrastructure and basic services, grassroots organizations can use bicycles to disseminate everything from health care to education. In so doing, the celebration of the bike as civic tool also involves analysis and criticism of the failure of government in these areas. More simply, the magazine regularly features articles about how cycling has changed people's relationships with friends and family—riding was a key factor in blogger Elden Nelson's weight loss, and in coping with his wife's illness and death from cancer as he became involved with, and supported by, charity rides to raise funds for cancer research (Donahue 17). Joe Kurmaskie, his wife, and his three sons, age nine, seven, and one, learned many lessons on togetherness in the course of a family ride across Canada (including the discovery that a cyclist "hauling 15 feet of bike train, three children, and hundreds of pounds of gear" has an appetite that "knows no mortal bounds") (91). Basically, the magazine is for people who want to be on their bikes all the time (or who want to someday be the sort of people who are able to do so) but for whom riding is partly, but never wholly, about fitness. Though it is possible to be very serious about cycling, it is very much a functional, fun, activity that promotes individual and social health.

Men's Health has perhaps the most consciously-formulated attitude towards wellness. On the one hand, the magazine does the expected, endorsing an exercise regimen and diet which promote muscle-building and weight loss; the magazine's formula for super foods, summed up in the acronym "ABSDIETPOWER," emphasizes the consumption of calorie-controlled nutrients and protein, balanced by suggestions on ways to temper inevitable splurges. Our friendly magazine has a stern undertone—apparently, "guys" appreciate straight-talk, welcoming warnings in the January 2010 issue that if one commits the "crime" of eating 1540 calories in a TGIF Cheesy Bacon Cheeseburger, he must be prepared for the "punishment" of shoveling snow for 3 hours (36). Readers are similarly given no-nonsense orders to "*drink this* [the 190-calorie grande caramel macchiato], *not that* [the 400-calorie grande white chocolate mocha]" at Starbucks (62). *Men's Health*'s "Eat This, Not That" feature, with editor David Zinczenko as spokesperson, has, in fact, turned into something of a social cause for the magazine and its readers, resulting not only in a diet book about making sensible meal choices, but a program for improving food and exercise programs in public schools. The magazine also regularly features articles on the American food industry, with frankly-proselytizing articles urging men to spurn processed food, factory-farmed meat and fish, and "Americanized" ethnic cuisines, to re-discover the pleasures of cooking authentic, simple food from scratch, and to take a stand against practices which negatively affect the health not only of the individual reader, but of community and planet as well. Nutrition, in what is becoming a quasi-ideology for the magazine, may be partly about shaping up for "booty calls"; surprisingly, good nutrition also involves being discriminating, responsibly civic-minded, and appreciative of healthful food.

Along with this nutritional idealism, *Men's Health* very explicitly makes fitness a central part of its ideology of manliness. That this ideology tends to reinforce modern gender roles is certainly not without its problems; nevertheless, my focus here is on how the magazine makes connections between fitness, sociability, self-respect, and respect for community which may provide a beneficial corrective for readers who are otherwise caught up in the less healthy aspects of North American commercial culture. The magazine poses a challenge to readers to prioritize their health and wellness, in particular to demonstrate to others masculine skill, and to achieve a particular appearance—one that will be sexually appealing to women. Whenever possible, working out is also meant to be sport-specific: as with *Bicycling,* in *Men's Health* the worth of physical activity is portrayed as inseparable from challenge, competition, and, importantly, enjoyment and social interaction. But, as with *Self,* the workout prescriptions are also designed to reflect the realities of readers' lives: many training regimes are centered on the gym, and designed to be done alone. Readers may pursue, or at least contemplate, an ideal; but the practical reality is that most readers must balance competing obligations to employers and family, and struggle to avoid the temptations of the couch/media/food combination. With little time left over for themselves, these readers must be time-efficient and pragmatic with their workouts.

But as we have seen, efficient weight-loss is only one of many important motives for readers' pursuit of fitness as part of the larger goal of wellness. Reader before-and-after profiles (the "Belly-Off Club") demonstrate the hazards of modern life where individuals become so focused on jobs and possessions that they lose sight of their health—their "wake-up call" is typically a sudden realization that their wellness is tied to that of others in their lives. As a typical example, in the January 2010 issue, reader Rich

Vittoria recounts how his weight was endangering his health, causing high blood pressure and sleep apnea—and his wearing a positive airway pressure device frightened his three-year old. By following *Men's Health's* advice about diet and exercise, Vittoria has lost the excess weight, regained his health, and become a crusader for healthful food in schools: "now I'm a role model for my sons and students" (62). In December 2009, author Jonathan Lesser recounts his realization that "a man *has* to be able to fix things": "I want to take care of this place the way a man should want to take care of his body…[The house is] a 1700 square foot extension of me. It's a living thing, and I can't call someone every time it hiccups" (111). Studying *Men's Health* is not something that readers are motivated to do only as a result of anxiety about appearance and sex-appeal; achieving wellness requires readers to actively acquire the skills, the competence, to build and maintain all aspects of their environment.

Certainly, these magazines present problems: we know that the advertising and the editorial content is designed to play on our loftiest aspirations—and our deepest anxieties—about what we think we should have in terms of knowledge, behavior, and appearance. In *Bicycling,* the anxiety is perhaps the mildest as readers are led to worry about cycling status—about whether they are doing it right, with the right gear, and that they look right doing it. In *Men's Health*, despite the cultivation of the casual tone, all "guys" and "stuff," the concern is more serious: the reader here is anxious not just about his appearance, but his appearance of competence as a man in contemporary culture: he needs to be man enough to know how to do the right thing, all the time, in bed, in a meeting, in the kitchen, on the playing field. For the women readers of *Self*, they worry about not being woman enough, where "enough" means being small and restrained in one's appetites for things like food and strength, which might threaten their appearance of feminine, heterosexual, attractiveness. Readers of both sexes can easily become caught up in consumption of advice and products, becoming obsessed with monitoring and controlling their bodies rather than challenging power relationships in our culture.

However, these publications can be, and are, created and read for what they claim to be, a source for helpful information, "useful stuff" to help us be healthier. We do not live in a healthy world—from the condition of the oceans to the condition of our arteries, we have not been very good at looking after ourselves. North Americans eat too much, and over half of us are overweight to obese; despite the proven benefits of physical activity, more than 50% of U.S. adults do not get enough physical activity to provide health benefits; 24% are not active at all in their leisure time ("Physical Activity and Good Nutrition"). Modern life, including the modern system of health care, makes it difficult to be healthy, not to mention potentially very expensive. How many basic health care plans offer unlimited coverage for nutritionists, counselors, personal training, and gym fees? How many jobs would allow us the time to use the full range of such services? To practice preventative healthcare, not to mention the larger goal of wellness, we are largely on our own, on our own time.

Thus, while wellness magazines do not solve all problems, for the reader who wants to take some action, make some positive change, these publications can be a legitimate starting point. Diet and exercise regimes that are very stringent, such as those in *Men's Health* or *Bicycling*, set goals to aspire to; regimes that are more basic, such as those in *Self,* provide a non-intimidating entry point. For those who are just starting the work of getting fit, exercise prescriptions that are too difficult would be counterproductive; many readers might be self-conscious about not being as fit as the magazines (and all of our culture's other, omnipresent media) portray as the ideal and so might rather work out alone in the privacy of their homes rather than face the exposure of the gym, or unforgiving cycling clothing. And even when changes in diet and nutrition do not result in a beach-ready body, they can still have very beneficial effects on health and wellness, such as lowering the risk of disease and debility, and improving, if not perfecting, body image through improving self-efficacy (Anderson et al. 510).

Wellness, when used as a code word for self-discipline and docility, is not something that should be coerced; but wellness when used to describe a desirable state of body and mind is not something that can be bestowed either. If individuals want to be healthy and well, they must actively construct that condition for themselves, as well as they can; they need information to do it, and publications such as the ones examined here can supply it. These publications do send conflicting messages to readers—increased anxiety could be one of them; but we must be careful not to assume that readers are only ever passive, acted upon by these publications, victimized; nor to assume that a concern with health must always be prompted by an unhealthy concern with appearance. Readers must be given credit for being able to actively use these publications in different ways, to achieve a variety of valid individual wellness goals.

Moreover, though it seems a somewhat paradoxical claim, the anxiety which might drive readers to be vigilant about their individual health and wellness has the potential to pull readers out of solipsism into more collective critique and social engagement. The magazines examined here, as representative of their genre, do, at first glance seem to focus only on the health—or lack of it—of individual bodies; however, a closer look reveals that all regard health and wellness within a larger social framework. The precarious state of the environment has been receiving growing attention, and the health and wellness magazines now regularly feature advice on how to make eco-friendly changes to one's lifestyle; if one is going to consume, one can at least now buy products that are less, rather than more, likely to harm the environment. The magazines all, to varying degrees, make connections between the reader's individual interests and social concerns which may affect them: changes to legislation which protect the environment by promoting cycling; problems within the health care system which result in sub-standard care; the relationship between industry and government which promotes cheap, but poor-quality food which harms animals, the environment, and consumers.

Throughout the year, these publications go beyond the individual's choice of sandwich or figure-flattering jeans to take on the larger issue of the physical and ethical health of groups: athletes, children, expectant mothers, cultures, nations. And to examine the various hazards which threaten the members of these groups means to question the social institutions which actively create or passively perpetuate those threats. All of these magazines set high standards of ethical conduct and are willing to critique and challenge failed institutions which threaten the physical or social health of their constituencies. While these feature articles undoubtedly arise from, and exacerbate, readers' anxieties, they also offer advice about the action that readers can take, ranging from taking individual measures to becoming involved with organized reform efforts.

The very nature of the self-help magazine ensures a focus on the self over the group: one's problems are one's own, and often brought out by one's own deficiency; the only solution is to recognize—constantly, every month—one's flaws, confess them, and perform elaborate rites of penance through vigilantly dieting, exercising, and shopping. And yet: there is potential here for us to construct the meaning of health and wellness in additional ways. The knowledge to promote and maintain the health of the body is not esoteric lore, possessed by a few; rather, there is "tons of useful stuff" that we can all draw upon to promote individual and group power instead of powerlessness, greater liberation instead of continued docility and obedience to hegemonic authority. With the proliferation of health information in these wellness magazines, and other forms of media in popular culture, our ability to educate ourselves might actually result not in increased hypochondriacal neurosis, but in increased expertise that will allow us to critically assess our institutions of power to see how deeply flawed they are, how poorly qualified they are to be dictating the terms of our wellness, and how necessary and possible it is for us to become involved with efforts for change. Reading our health magazines, raising our individual level of awareness, knowledge, and expertise, may take us from advocating the wellness of our own bodies to working together to improve the wellness of the body politic.

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Notes

[1] "Health" is "the condition of being sound in body, mind, or spirit; especially: freedom from physical disease or pain" ("Health"). The term "wellness" describes, in general, "a level of health that minimizes the chances of becoming ill," and, specifically, an embodied experience "of emotional, environmental, mental, physical, social, and spiritual health" ("Wellness").

[2] See also: Duncan, "The Politics of Women's Body Images and Practices: Foucault, the Panopticon, and Shape Magazine"; Dworkin, "'Holding Back': Negotiating A Glass Ceiling On Women's Muscular Strength"; Marcula, "Beyond The Perfect Body: Women's Body Image Distortion in Fitness Magazine Discourse"; and Spitzak, *Confessing Excess*.

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