

New Sexism?: Readers' Responses to the use of Irony in Men's Magazines

**Bethan Benwell
Department of English Studies
University of Stirling
Stirling
UK
FK9 4LA**

b.m.benwell@stir.ac.uk

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Abstract

A common motif of 'new' forms of masculinity in recent years has been the adoption of what have been termed 'new sexism' discourses. This involves the legitimation of male power in new and creative ways, often by the strategic accommodation or negotiation of liberal, progressive or feminist discourses. In this paper, I examine one particular 'new sexism' device – irony. Irony is a versatile device in men's magazines which allows a speaker to articulate both anti-feminist sentiments as well as engage in discourses of femininity, whilst disclaiming responsibility or ownership for both. This strategic use of irony in relation to the expression of sexist or homophobic views is a common device in the 'new lad' magazines I will be examining in this paper.

Compounding the slipperiness of the ironic utterance is the acknowledgement that it may be read variously by different audiences. For this reason, my analysis attempts to move beyond the rather narrow textual focus normally favoured in language analysis, to consider the multiple, often contradictory responses produced by audiences.

The paper will consider firstly, the reading habits and dispositions of a range of dedicated readers of men's magazines. Then the paper will consider detailed responses to the texts under discussion and specifically the meaning of the ironic utterance. The lack of consensus elicited by such an exercise arguably problematises our initial reading of irony as a device of 'new sexism'.

Introduction: Discourses of masculinity in men's lifestyle magazines

The focus of my paper is the 'new lad' lifestyle magazine such as *Loaded*, *FHM*, *Maxim* and *Front*. The evolution of consumer masculinity in Britain from 'new man' to 'new lad' has been well documented (see Nixon 1996, Edwards 1997, Jackson et al 2001 and Benwell 2003). Put briefly, 'new man' emerged at about the time of the launch of the first contemporary UK men's lifestyle magazine, *Arena*. 'New man' was an avid consumer and unashamed narcissist, but had also internalised and endorsed the principles of feminism including a reassessment of the traditional division of labour and a new commitment to fatherhood (Beynon (2002: 100-105) makes the distinction between these two main strands as 'new man as narcissist' and 'new man as nurturer'). 'New lad' was a clear reaction to 'new man', and arguably an attempt to reassert the power of masculinity deemed to have been lost by the concessions made to feminism by 'new man'. 'New lad', most clearly embodied in *loaded* magazine, but also by its competing successors (e.g. *FHM*, *Maxim*, *Front*) marked a return to traditional masculine values of sexism, exclusive male friendship and homophobia. Its key **distinction** from traditional masculinity was an unrelenting gloss of knowingness and irony, a reflexivity about its own condition which arguably rendered it more immune from criticism – more of which later. It was also a construct which drew upon working-class culture for its values and forms, was younger than 'new man', was little invested in the world of work, preferring to drink, party, holiday and watch football, made barely any reference at all to fatherhood, addressed women only as sexual objects and was ethnically white.

There have been various accounts offered for this particular shift from 'new man' to 'new lad' and for the condition of modern incarnations of masculinity in magazines and popular culture more generally, including 'crisis of masculinity' accounts (Faludi 1999), 'backlash to feminism accounts' (Faludi 1992), the need for 'constructed certitude' within a

'Risk Society' (Beck 1992) and, last but not least, the all-important consumer imperative, thriving on a perpetual creation of needs and new identities.

New Sexism and Irony: A Discursive Strategy of the New Lad?

A common motif of 'new' forms of masculinity in recent years, and frequently gracing the pages of new lad publications, has been the adoption of what have been termed 'new sexism' discourses. This involves the legitimisation of male power in new and creative ways, often by the strategic accommodation or negotiation of liberal, progressive or feminist discourses. This sexism-by-subterfuge is explainable in terms of the hegemonic workings of masculinity which relies on consent and complicity rather than domination for its power and is also composed of diverse and sometimes competing practices of masculinity.

In this research, I'm interested in examining one particular 'new sexism' device – **irony**. Irony is a versatile device in men's magazines which allows a speaker to articulate politically incorrect views whilst disclaiming responsibility or ownership for them. This strategic use of irony is arguably a common device in men's lifestyle magazines particularly in relation to, firstly the expression of sexist or homophobic views, and secondly participation in the 'feminised' realm of consumption. Jackson et al comment that 'one of the defining features of the 'new' men's lifestyle magazines is the pervasive use of irony' (2001: 103). However, whilst we can surmise that an underlying or oppositional meaning is intended by the text, we cannot actually prove this. In this way, irony can operate to simultaneously affirm and deny a particular value. Indeed, Edwards describes *Loaded* as 'at once ironic and blindingly reactionary' (1997: 80), and Jackson et al describe the excessive type of irony found in new lad magazines as being more akin to a complicit cynicism: .. 'both the readers and producers of the magazines are joined together in a cynical game whereby no one any longer takes the content of the magazines seriously, whilst simultaneously recognising that they promote a masculinist culture' (2001: 104-5)

Examples of such cynicism/irony strategically employed in the context of firstly sexism and secondly the feminised connotations of certain kinds of consumption can be seen below:

Naughty Girls

HELLO BOYS! So we walked into this bar, saw these five pretty ladies, and asked them if they'd be so kind as to show us their undies. Sadly they took it badly, slapped us hard, and we left looking stupid. But then we went back with our magic X-ray spectacles. And sweet Lord, we forgave them.... (followed by picture of lingerie clad women propping up a bar)

Grooming awards

Excessive? Maybe. Essential? Yes. Because, as we keep telling you, women won't sleep with you if you're all stinky

In both examples, the irony (cued by excessive, hyperbolic, ludicrous propositions) acts simultaneously both to undermine the politics (we're not seriously sexist or seriously invested in male grooming) and to preserve and uphold the meaning (we're promoting the sexual objectification of women and male consumerism in the realm of male beauty products nonetheless).

Compounding the slipperiness of the ironic utterance (located in a non-textual space) is the acknowledgement that it may be read variously by different audiences. Indeed it is difficult to assert with absolute confidence that such examples really **do** constitute irony,

despite the ludicrous, playful, hyperbolic language as well as the tacit assumption shared by critical media debates and academics that this is the dominant tone of men's magazines. For this reason, my analysis attempts to move beyond the rather narrow textual focus normally favoured in language analysis, to consider the multiple, often contradictory responses produced by readers. Such an approach attempts to describe meaning as a discursive process - and to articulate the relationships between various sites of cultural process including production, representation, identity and consumption. Richard Johnson (1986) has described this movement around and between these sites as 'circuits of culture'. So for a cultural text such as the men's magazine, we need to consider not only the product itself, but also the varied contexts of consumption and the importance of *reception* as a crucial builder of meaning. Indeed, the methodological problem of identifying irony (due to its location in a non-textual space) provides a useful analogy for broader issues of **the unknowability of intention and reception** in the meanings created in and around the text. An analysis of audience responses is one step towards an ideal 'triangulation' between text, participants and observer.

I will consider firstly, the reading habits and dispositions of a range of dedicated readers of men's magazines with particular reference to issues of gender, sexism, humour and irony. Then I will consider detailed responses to the texts under discussion and specifically the meaning of the ironic utterance. The lack of consensus elicited by such an exercise arguably problematises our initial reading of irony as a device of 'new sexism'.

The Informants: Invested and Uninvested Readers

Research took the form of informal, unstructured focus groups led and guided by a male researcher. At this stage of the research only two focus groups have been conducted, so the data is necessarily limited and a more diverse demography would ideally need to be represented. Nevertheless, qualitative analysis of the transcripts reveals interesting and telling information.

The first group consisted of two 17 yr old males still at school in Scotland studying for their Highers. The second group consisted of four 21 yr old male students at a Scottish university.

Method of analysis

Unstructured interviews and focus groups have been the focus of much debate and discussion within sociology and cultural studies largely due to the way they have often been treated as a **transparent** description of opinion, or account of practice. Practitioners of qualitative methods such as ethnographers and ethnomethodologists have been keen to highlight the **mediated** nature of such discourse and identify the common constraints and limitations of this methodology.

In my analysis of the focus group data, I was acutely aware of the constraints of the medium. Firstly there was an issue of self-presentation in both groups which might have militated against the expression of more 'candid' accounts. This was particularly so with the group of 17 year olds in relation to sexuality and experience. The status of the interviewer possibly inhibited opinion in relation to politically-sensitive subjects such as sexism and homophobia commonly cited in critical discourses of disapproval in the media debates surrounding men's magazines. The guiding role of the interviewer meant that issues raised tended to be his (or indirectly mine) rather than theirs. The dynamics of the group led, particularly in the case of the 21 yr olds, to one dominant speaker frequently setting the agenda. Despite the fact that the interviews were lengthy (up to 2 hours long) and involved hands-on engagement with the magazines and detailed discussion of particular features and adverts, it was clear that discussion of reading practices is no substitute for the individual and

private reading experience itself, a philosophical dilemma familiar to researchers of audiences

Such misgivings about the mediated quality of such data has led to the conclusion by some researchers that such interviews are capable of telling us nothing beyond the interview itself and has led them to focus exclusively on **naturally-occurring** conversation and behaviour only. On the other hand, other researchers see data derived from unstructured interviews as a rich source of **normative** cultural meanings and narratives (what Scollon describes as ‘members’ generalisations’ (1995: 278-9) which may then be compared **interdiscursively** with other sites of meaning-production, such as the magazine texts, TV and naturally-occurring conversations. My own analysis adopts this perspective and uses conversational analytical techniques in order to identify the on-going discursive construction of identities and normative cultural meanings constructed in the focus group discussion. As a brief example we can see an interesting sequence in the interview with the 21yr olds in which the group police one member’s account of his relationship to the consumption of grooming products. The interviewer has asked about their reading practices and whether there are parts of the magazine they avoid:

I: Are there parts of the magazine you always ignore?

In his answer, Mike says humorously and to much laughter,

M: I generally try to skip past the 50 pages worth of adverts
[laughter]

Laughter from other participants is often a useful gauge of normative values. Here it is clear that there is a cultural consensus that adverts are a dominant part of the magazines, perhaps even an implicit acknowledgement that their revenue financially underpins the publication, but that they are not worthy of attention and an irritating distraction. The interviewer then says:

I: Mike avoids adverts (1) is that the same for all of you?

Which is taken up by the rest of the group confirming Mike’s opinion:

G: Yeah (.) I try my best not to look at them

D: There’s just so much advertising in them anyway(.) turn a page ‘oh no not another advertisement’ you’re like ‘is there anything here worth reading’

J: I remember doing a Nivea thing that I bought Nivea after reading it years ago

I: An article rather than an advert

J: Yeah it was like a sponsored article

M: Lucky this is anonymous!

[lots of laughter]

Here it is made clear by Mike’s humorous comment and the group’s unanimous laughter that Jonathan has breached some sort of normative masculine code by admitting a) to being susceptible to the power of advertising and b) to buying a grooming product more commonly associated with women and femininity. The sequence of talk: the consensus built up about the degraded status of adverts in these men’s cultural world followed by Jonathan’s flouting of the code, and the humour used to make the censure palatable are all clues to a kind of normative masculinity operating in the cultural sphere of this group. This kind of analysis can

be more fruitful in revealing implicit attitudes and norms than a direct question about masculinity or even attitudes to using grooming products.

One of the most striking things revealed by the interviews was the construction of two types of readers: broadly **invested** and **uninvested/detached**. In the group of 17yr olds, a far more **affiliated** and **invested** attitude to the magazines is revealed. They both regularly read *FHM* and *Maxim* and one actually gets *FHM* by monthly subscription. By contrast, the group of 21 yr olds construct themselves as uninvested, referring to a past, younger, invested self:

I: Do you actually buy any of these magazines?

M: yeah I **used to be** (0.5) totally addicted to them and buy(.) most of them... but I(.) kind of stopped(.) now(.) um and **if I buy them at all** I generally buy *GQ* and I'll buy *Esquire* but I kind of got fed up with...

G: Um **I don't buy very many any more**(0.5) **I used to buy** sort of like(.) (a few (0.5) if I'm out I might **pick up** one or two(.) **something to read**....

J: I'm pretty much the same um(.) **I used to** read *FHM* and *Maxim* like pretty much every time they came out and stuff. Now I'll buy them **occasionally every so often**...

D: I only used to read *FHM* and again it was maybe just till a couple of years ago I stopped buying it

M: ...from **buying them so much when we were younger** and stuff(.) you tend to go(.) you're still caught by the cover but I think **the sensible part of your brain** goes 'that's three quid for something you're going to look at once'

All participants use a past-time perspective to describe their regular engagement with the magazines and construct any current engagement as specifically superficial, functional. There is a dichotomy being constructed here between the younger, invested, naïve self and the current, wiser, experienced self, benefiting from hindsight. In line with other studies of magazine readers, of both men's and women's magazines (Hermes 1995, Jackson et al 2001) these readers construct the magazines as trashy, disposable, a bit of fun if there's nothing better to do:

M: ...a bunch of stuff just to amuse guys for a wee while(.) just if you're sat on a train or if there's nothing on TV

In contrast, the younger group reveal a series of insights about their reading practices which is suggestive of an unselfconsciously, unembarrassed investment in the magazines. They profess to read the magazine systematically (where the older readers flick), they describe the function of the magazines as 'advice' or 'giving insight' into experiences the readers might not have access to, they actively fill in polls and questionnaires – sometimes sending these back to the magazines, they pull out the posters and use them to decorate their bedrooms, they find articles 'very funny' and sometimes single out regular writers. At one stage of the interview they discuss reading practices in terms of a kind of brand loyalty:

A: ...people can say they prefer *Maxim* (.) you write in to *Maxim* and slag off *FHM* and vice versa(.) you kind of pick your team(.) then you find one more funny than the other

A: ...I don't know what it is you kind of feel a loyalty to(.) more than you like the best(.) it's almost like a football team

The comparison of the two groups in some ways represents a key development over time, profiling the development of its readers – what might be termed a shift from belief to

atheism. The older group might be thought at this stage to be agnostic – displaying distance from the magazine, but being conversant with its discourse, and affiliated to some of its values. In support of this I observed how, despite their cynicism and dismissal of these magazines, the humour, discourse and joshing of the focus group discussion with this group very much emulated the style and ethos of the magazine itself.

The younger group are affiliated but curiously artless and uninitiated into the culture, often disclaiming the rights and privileges of the ‘new lad’, such as drinking and sex, and unaware of the critical discourse surrounding its broader reception in the media and unacquainted with the discourse. Compare for instance:

21 yr old: ‘these women are hot’ ‘it’s the whole “guy’s commitment” thing’
17 yr old: ‘they’re all very attractive women aren’t they’ ‘that was probably geared towards the males that obviously like the lesbian scene’

The 21 yr olds are also far more au fait with the media constructions **surrounding** the magazines:

‘a laddish kind of thing’; ‘it was that whole ladette thing’; ‘it’s about the “new lad” who’s kinda sensitive [laughter] but he’s still got that rugged side to him’

These observations demonstrate the need to engage with a broad and diverse set of readers, since the profiles – in this case on the basis of **age** – are really very distinct. Further focus group studies might look at different educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. Observations about the relative levels of discursive competence between the two groups will have a significant bearing upon the analysis of readers’ engagement with irony in the magazines, which I will now turn to.

Readers’ Engagements with New Sexism and Irony

The first observation to make is that **none** of the readers made explicit reference to irony in relation to the magazines, nor seem to see its operation in features or ads. In fact, having conducted these interviews, I might feel quite tempted to conclude that the compulsory irony assumed to be a crucial aspect of the new lad identity is a critical media or academic construction. Indeed, clear instances of irony seem to be evident only in the discourse of the 21 yr olds’ interview:

D: I tended to buy them just for really the articles and obviously for the men on the front covers
[laughter]

Here, Danny uses an explicit instance of irony in order to convey humorously his appreciation of the sexualised images of women that appear on the magazine covers. In this instance, irony is being used to uphold the arguably sexist values of the magazine – humour making these values more palatable. Later Mike responds very deliberately and ironically to the question by the interviewer:

I: Cooking isn’t cool? why’s that
M: (*deliberate tone*) because it’s a men’s magazine and women are meant to do the cooking and men are meant to do the hunting and gathering

Here the operation of irony is ambiguous. Mike is perhaps responding sarcastically to what he perceives to be a rather obvious question. On the other hand he may be deliberately exaggerating what he sees as the unprogressive politics of the magazine – a strategy which undermines rather than forgives. More tangentially, at certain points both groups make reference to not taking the magazine too seriously:

you don't take what's in them deadly serious though (17 yr old)
to say that a guy would be offended by that...it would be he would have no sense of
humour whatsoever (21 yr old)

Secondly, both groups are adamant that the magazines are not sexist. One of the 17 year olds describes the magazines' attitude to women as 'complimentary' and one of the 21 yr olds describes the objectification of women in the magazines as 'not sexist' but simply 'a selling tool – used by marketers all over'. This unwillingness, even by the 'uninvested' readers, to criticise the politics and values of the magazine was a common pattern in the interviews and reflected the same sort of ambivalence and contradiction observed earlier. However, this ambivalence was more evident in the group of 21 yr olds. At another point, the same self-professed uninvested reader expresses a personal view which curiously morphs into that of the magazine, so that we're unclear about whether these are his politics or those held by the magazine which he is objectively describing:

M:... And if it was a big, ugly woman on the cover you wouldn't buy the magazine
(.) because above all it's a men's magazine (.) it doesn't profess to be anything else.

An interesting sequence occurs when the 21 yr olds are encouraged to look at a promotional feature in *FHM* for grooming products such as aftershave and moisturiser. This piece of text causes great hilarity:

M: *Crave* by Calvin Klein. You said: "quite simply, the nuts! Looks mad, smells great. And survived a three-storey drop from my balcony!"

The participants all comment on the deliberate masculinisation of a potentially feminine product by this language:

M: it's trying to make it as unfeminine as possible (0.5) it's trying to make it as masculine as possible

Yet clearly they interpret it ironically – the discourse is so exaggeratedly macho it is seen, by these readers, as ludicrous. In this way they seem to distance themselves from the values of the magazine. But later, Mike describes such blurbs as 'typically the kind of smart comments just floating through it' – thus seeming to recuperate it in terms of the magazine's value. This ability to accommodate contradictory and ambivalent responses to the magazines was a common feature of the interviews and one which arguably served to uphold their masculinist values.

Our final focus is on an article in *Maxim* (April 1997) about facial, massage and manicure treatments entitled 'Shape your eyebrows, sir?' which is delivered with a detached, tongue-in-cheek tone throughout. The subject matter of the article raises the spectre of an 'unmanly' masculinity and embodies the tension that exists between masculinity and the commercial needs of the magazine. Because of the connotations of passivity associated with conspicuous consumption, particularly of products traditionally associated with a feminine

realm in which appearance is a premium, selling to men becomes a thorny, troubled proposition that has to be delicately negotiated by the text's producers. The overtly commercial aspects of the magazine, such as promotional features and adverts are therefore frequently shot through with a knowing irony, humour or even explicitly anti-commercial discourse. Such an article is thus an exercise in reconciling this tension.

The opening description of the treatment is simultaneously explicit about promoting a product and promoting a particular type of masculinity:

A men-only grooming shop for normal, everyday, nothing-funny-about my testosterone-levels-thank you- blokes who quite fancy the idea of a de-stressing massage, with maybe a facial and, oh what the hell, a manicure while I'm here.
(Maxim April 1997: 106)

The interpretation of the tone of the piece as an ironic one leads to a further set of implications: that this piece exists as a form of self-parody, whereby irony is directed at the masculinity espoused by the magazine and by implication, its readers. This more ironic reading of the piece might be inclined to view the defensive posturing of the macho narrator bluffing his way into a feminine realm despite his protestations as a joke at his expense. Such exaggerated defensiveness, we might be inclined to conclude, is an object of absurdity and ridicule. This reading, implicitly *rejecting* the masculine resistance to consumerism, would allow the commercial imperative to be recuperated. At the same time, the literal level, because it is good-humouredly presented, is preserved, and with it the principles of new lad masculinity. It could be argued through this complex layering of irony and ambiguity that masculinity has retained its power by its adaptability. It would seem that the reader is required to tread a subtle and practiced course through minefield of irony, ambiguity and double-voicing and that the ability to 'read' at two levels simultaneously is an important prerequisite for the male consumer. Not only has the feature incorporated elements of an oppositional (feminine) discourse (the key principle of the feature that men may care about their bodies), it has left intact more traditional assumptions about gender (that explicit narcissism is rejected).

I was interested to see whether the readers' responses to this article would reflect an understanding of the potentially complex layerings of irony here. This is the relevant sequence from the interview with the 21 yr olds:

I: what do you think about the humour here?

J: I'd say it was fairly in keeping with what we talking about previously in the rest of the magazines (.) even just the first sentence "nothing funny about my testosterone levels thank you"

G: trying to justify himself (.) the writer of the article

D: they're implying that it's more of the women's and gay man' thing to do rather than the macho editor of a magazine or whatever he is

I: does it work?

D: I think humour is a good way of getting around touchy subjects like y'know if you asked a normal kind of lad he'd be like "oh I'm not going to go and have a facial or something' but if you put a bit of a humorous slant on it then they might kind of think (.) "oh well maybe"

I: Greg you said about there's a kind of justification for the reader in going and doing this

G: yeah it's just like (.) had to do it but it's alright I'm still a lad still a geezer but he enjoyed it

J: I think he's trying to normalise it a wee bit (0.5) I dunno I didn't read men's magazines ten years ago I don't know but moisturisers were almost unheard of (.) it was almost a gay thing to do and it's kind of a progression I think

I: is the humour directed at anyone else? kind of self justification thing that you all picked up on (.) any other object?

M: it could be maybe a "don't worry we're still a men's magazine kind of thing we may have gone and done it but we didn't really enjoy it that much"

I: how does it make you feel as readers?

[long pause – awkward]

M: I probably wouldn't have read the article anyway

These responses are revealing in a number of ways. Firstly they show that the respondents all recognise unanimously the function of the humour - as a strategy or justification in relation to selling grooming products to men. However the implication – that this exaggerated defensiveness might **undermine** masculinity or the values of 'new lad' is avoided or missed. Humour as a defensive strategy in other words is seen as **visible** part of discourse rather than a hidden, discourse which has to be unpacked. This implies that the masculinist politics which might be seen as offensive from a feminist or progressive point of view, are endorsed and normalised by these readers, and any sense of 'knowingness' about such discourses from a post-feminist perspective seems absent from their responses. At the same time, the point at which the interviewer asks them about their **own** responses to the text as readers is met with awkwardness and distance, raising crucial issues about the way the respondents view themselves *as* readers.

Conclusions

Within the focus group discourse about men's magazines I found that readers – particularly the older ones - are able to negotiate an interesting line between two positions: one of resistance and one of acceptance or even internalisation of the magazines' values. The detachment, distance from and absence of loyalty to the magazines displayed by the 21 yr olds is often curiously at odds with their defence of the values of masculinity upheld and endorsed by such magazines. Such patterns are supported by existing research by e.g. Ballaster et al (1991) and McRobbie (1999) on women's magazines – who argue that readers are easily and unembarrassedly able to accommodate the contradictions thrown up by the magazines and in their responses to them. In relation to men's magazines, this comfortable accommodation of contradiction and ambiguity tends to shore up traditional masculine values.

The lack of critical distance in both interviews from the traditional gender politics espoused by the magazines led to the tentative conclusion that a conception of 'new sexism' is largely redundant as far as these readers are concerned, since they seem uninvested in defending what others might deem to be traditional sexism. This non-ironic reading of men's magazines is also one arguably shared by the magazine producers. In Tim Southwell's (co-founding editor of *loaded*) book about the creation of *loaded* he asserts: 'Now what I've always thought about *loaded* was there was no irony to it at all, everything was done from the heart' (1998: 254). The key motif of a 'knowing' irony, recognised and repeated in the critical media and in academic research seems less relevant to the actual readers and producers of the magazines. It is an observation which again flags up the crucial importance of a broader, more comprehensive circuits of culture model of meaning in the analysis of texts.

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Biographical Note

Bethan Benwell is a lecturer in English language and linguistics in the Department of English Studies at the University of Stirling. Her research interests include language and gender (particularly popular discourses of masculinity), conversational analysis and discourse analysis and she has published journal articles and chapters on masculine discourse in men's lifestyle magazines and (with Stokoe) student identity in tutorial discourse. She is the editor of *Masculinity and Men's Lifestyle Magazines* (Blackwell) and is currently co-writing *Discourse and Identity* for EUP.