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NBC's Jane Pauley interviews Ruth Whitney, Editor in Chief of Glamour magazine, about the evolving nature of fashion coverage.

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50th Anniversary of Glamour Magazine

JANE PAULEY, anchor: The time is April 1939 and a new magazine is making its debut stated goal to be an interpreter of Hollywood fashion, beauty and charm in terms of the modern American women’s daily needs. Well that concept worked back in 1939 but Glamour magazine is around today because it kept pace with changing times. Ruth Whitney is the driving force behind much of that change, she has been Glamour’s Editor in Chief since 1967, 1968 but who’s counting. I was flipping through the original 1939, when I guess readers were taught how they could achieve this movie star, this glamorous look in the evening clothes that Ginger would wear in the movies or that Davis would wear in the movies and I’m thinking she was a real daydreamer wasn’t she?

Ms. RUTH WHITNEY, Editor in Chief, Glamour Magazine: She was a daydreamer, and it was a good magazine to daydream on. There’s an article in that issue, Olivia de Havilland is talking about what she expects of her clothes. There is a story of the American man, and we are talking about Cary Grant and Jimmy Stewart and Ray Milland and Henry Fonda. It was a good magazine to dream on.

PAULEY: I got to tell you its still fun to read even now I had trouble putting it down. 1943 a subtle change happened, we have a copy of that 1943 when a new slogan was added, “For the girl with a job.”

WHITNEY: Glamour was quick to that thought, and of course it fits right in with the number of women who work today.

PAULEY: Well how did she change, this girl is not so much a daydreamer, she has got a job to go to, or what is it still a fantasy too?

WHITNEY: Well think the forties, it is not the fantasy that it was back in ’39-- we were close to the war, into the war in fact. She may be working well she is working.

PAULEY: She’s not dating a lot because the guys are gone…

WHITNEY: Right, she’s making her own money, so she’s more intense about her life and more earnest but nowhere near the quality of depth and complexity that women bring to their lives today.

PAULEY: I don’t know why I make this observation but in 1939 a really pretty dress can be had for like 3 dollars and 50 cents but the foundation undergarment, the girdle cost 12 dollars, which might have been a
couple weeks salary for that young woman.

WHITNEY: But terribly necessary for them. That first issue was 15 cents.

PAULEY: A breakthrough for you personally, the first August after you take the helm you put a black model on your cover, was that a controversial thing for you to do, did it take a lot of meetings.

WHITNEY: That was a very controversial thing to do and it created a fair amount of consternation, should we change the circulation or the distribution pattern, should more copies go to the South, should less copies go to the South. What was marvelous about it was that it had such a happy ending readers were really quite ready for this kind of thinking and it turned out to be the largest sale in the history of Glamour up till then.

PAULEY: No kidding.

WHITNEY: It was great.

PAULEY: Well done… We also have a cover featuring someone who is very well known today, Cybill Shepherd was a cover girl in 1970. Which brings this question, how much of the sales on a newsstand is pegged to the description of the articles in the magazine and how much is Cybill Shepherd’s face, or the cover girl’s face, do you know?

WHITNEY: Well you can only guess, no one really knows. The face makes the difference in that it can turn the potential reader off or it can turn the potential reader on, but finally the sales I think are made by the cover lines themselves, the words there and unless you can come up with concepts that have some urgency, some reason for her to buy that month, that issue…

PAULEY: Look at what the articles are in the new issue, you’re writing about living without health insurance…

WHITNEY: There’s a dreamer.

PAULEY: Women in crime, are guns the answer? When did it evolve into real how-to tips for living your life, not just for how to put your make up on?

WHITNEY: Month by month and year by year, and really with the change in women. You know, magazines are a little bit ahead but American women are much more complex. They’re involved in things that they never dreamed of before.

PAULEY: Well to be fair your readership is a little older and the early daydreaming days she was only 21 on average…

WHITNEY: Well when I came, the median age was 21 of the primary reader. It’s now 26. But that’s a big jump because that means, for the most part the readers are out of their homes though maybe moving back again.

PAULEY: Right, that happens…

WHITNEY: But on their own and working.

PAULEY: You know also I am struck with back in… this is the brand new issue and I know you are very happy I’m holding this up because its on the newsstands, but alright this is Beverly Johnson and Kim Alexis who are very well known. Christie Brinkley, Cheryl Tiegs… at least these two certainly, these women, these cover girl faces, or their bodies, sell as many magazines on Sports Illustrated swim suit issues as they do to women’s magazines. What is it about the cross appeal that these faces have for
women and men.

WHITNEY: I’m not sure its faces on Sports Illustrated but I think they are simply beautiful women and standards of men and women about what is a beautiful woman aren’t that different.

PAULEY: How did you decide which cover girls to use on this 50th anniversary cover?

WHITNEY: Well these are all super models, they have all been on many, many Glamour covers and actually Cheryl Tiegs, the years that she has been on Glamour covers span 22 years and the four of them combined have done something like 81 Glamour covers so it was kind of a natural choice.

PAULEY: No wonder it’s such a heavy weight issue, thank you and I wish you continued success.

WHITNEY: Thank you.