

*The Re-Education of Teen Vogue: Elaine Welteroth and Her Transformative Vision for Teenage Journalism*

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**Abstract:** In late fall of 2015, Condé Nast—the parent corporation of many notable magazines such as *Vogue*, *Architectural Digest*, and *Vanity Fair*—faced a decision regarding a change in oversight for their teenage publication, *Teen Vogue*. While Amy Astley, founder and editor-in-chief extraordinaire, had led the magazine since its conception, she was on the way out, and so, it seemed, was *Teen Vogue*'s original vision. The change in editor was more than an administrative shift—it would mark whether or not *Teen Vogue* was moving into the progressive world of youth politics or staying grounded in their tried-and-true stereotypical white, affluent, teen girl message surrounding boys and beauty. That same year, Condé Nast took a risky step: they transitioned to a triumvirate style of leadership, as opposed to appointing a clear head. Phillip Picardi (digital director), Marie Suter (creative director), and Elaine Welteroth (print director) charged forth with a modern message surrounding identity politics, sex positivity, and youth advocacy. In the age of technology, the successful rebrand of *Teen Vogue* actively pushed back against the pervasive narrative across the industry that print journalism is dying. Furthermore, Welteroth's leadership challenges the notion that intersectional feminism, criticism of white supremacy, and anti-capitalist conversation can move successfully into the realm of popular culture.

***Teen Vogue Breaks the Internet***

On December 10, 2016, Lauren Duca's op-ed "Donald Trump is Gaslighting America" hit the *Teen Vogue* website (TeenVogue.com), and just a day later, the article went viral, reaching corners of the web *Teen Vogue* content had never before seen. The piece hinged on the Central Intelligence Agency's recent announcement that Russia had indeed intervened in the 2016 presidential election and Trump's subsequent denial of the agency's claims (Duca 2016). From there, Duca goes on to define gaslighting—an individual's intentional manipulation of the narrative surrounding their actions after they have caused harm to another—and expand upon how Trump's presidency relied on this tactic typically found in abusive relationships and the blurring of lines between fact and fiction (Duca 2016).

Under the digital direction of Phillip Picardi, a young, openly queer journalism creative, *Teen Vogue* had been producing more and more political content on its website in the year leading up to Duca's article breaking the internet. They began veering from their tried-and-true approach centered around the imagery of pre-teen aesthetics and directed at affluent, likely white, tween girls interested in fashion and beauty. However, the print version of the magazine maintained its original vision, so the website acted as more of a brainstorming test site, while the print magazine did not have to compromise its initial branding (Fernandez 2017). Duca's article garnered over a

million unique views<sup>1</sup> as opposed to regular views<sup>2</sup> (Fernandez 2017). The piece was even shared by news and journalism icon Dan Rather<sup>3</sup> on Twitter, as he wrote “@teenvogue may be an unlikely source for a detailed look at ‘gaslighting’ + Donald Trump, but there you have it...”

Just a year before this as Picardi is beginning to experiment with more pointedly political content, Condé Nast, the administrative parent organization of both *Vogue* and *Teen Vogue*, faced a difficult decision. In late 2015, Amy Astley, the founder of *Teen Vogue*, internally announced she was stepping down from her role as editor-in-chief (EIC) to run *Architectural Digest*, a design and décor-based publication (Fernandez 2017). Condé Nast then had to decide if they should take the risk of expanding on the sociopolitical work developed by Picardi on the website and choose a young visionary as the new editor-in-chief to translate this into print, or if they should continue to center the magazine around their initial, reliable demographic. In essence, with this new administrative choice Condé Nast ran the risk of either moving too far forward too fast for their audience or becoming markedly irrelevant in the world of journalism.

### ***Vogue* Becomes a Household Name**

*Vogue* was founded in 1892 by Arthur Baldwin Turnure as a journal for New York City’s most elite (“Vogue” n.d.). The magazine began picking up traction in 1909 when it was bought by Condé Nast Publishers who resolidified its vision to be a woman centric magazine which would set the standard for fashion and beauty (Conde Nast Russia n.d.). Cultural conceptions of *Vogue* are due in large part to Diana Vriland, the iconic 1960s EIC who molded a brand for the magazine as toeing the line between elegance and sex appeal (Conde Nast Russia n.d.). Readers looked to *Vogue*’s pages for high-profile fashion and editorial images.

A new era of *Vogue* began in 1988 when Anna Wintour became the EIC, shifting the cover style to highlight women in their entirety, rather than simply the face (“Vogue” n.d.). Additionally, Wintour created a trend of using celebrities across various sectors of entertainment for the cover, making a *Vogue* shoot one of the most coveted achievements in stardom. Anna’s vision to entrench *Vogue* into the day-to-day lives of all Americans eventually led to the creation of *Teen Vogue*, a teenage-focused publication that would start young girls early on their *Vogue* education.

### **The Origins of *Teen Vogue***

Amy Astley was handpicked by Anna Wintour, long time *Vogue* editor-in-chief and Condé Nast artistic director, to launch *Teen Vogue* in the early 2000s. She first ran different versions of the magazine from 2000-2002, and officially releasing the first edition in June of 2002 (Murg n.d.). When the ball first started rolling, the magazine existed for the specific purpose of profiling fashion and beauty for younger girls, as it was meant to be a “baby sister” publication whose readers would eventually grow into *Vogue* (Carr 2003). The print page size was even one-third smaller than the standard magazine, a physical reminder of its intended positionality (Carr 2003). Additionally, it debuted at only \$1.50 a copy, significantly cheaper than its competitors (Carr 2003).

The move was an inherently risky one for Condé, as they typically started or bought publications with significant circulation marketed towards adults, such as *Vogue*, *GQ*, *Allure*, and *Architectural Digest*. According to *the New York Times*, the intended circulation for *Teen Vogue* in 2004 was 450,000, while Condé publications typically reached the standard of 750,000 at

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<sup>1</sup> Unique views refers to the number of individual devices that have accessed the piece.

<sup>2</sup> Views refers to the number of times the article is opened.

<sup>3</sup> Dan Rather is an American journalist and previous Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) newscaster whose covered multiple monumental historical moments in the past century (“Dan Rather” n.d.)

minimum (Carr 2003). As *Teen Vogue* entered a crowded, unfamiliar market with demand fading fast, Condé Nast administration primarily relied on the power of the publication's namesake. The word "vogue" and all its various definitions were—and still are—so pop culturally salient that teenagers would recognize it on the shelf, even if they had not yet read a copy of the parent magazine itself.

*Vogue* was relatively late to the game in terms of launching a "younger" publication, as other prominent fashion magazines such as *Elle* and *Cosmopolitan* had already hit the shelves with *Elle Girl* and *CosmoGirl* respectively, with the latter boasting a circulation of over one million (Carr 2003). Despite overall teenage print magazine circulation going down from 9 million to 8.2 million from 2002-2003, *Teen Vogue* took off upon launch, breaking even in the fifth year and garnering impressive advertisement partnerships such as the well-known high fashion corporation Chanel (Carr 2003). Beginning in 2008 *Teen Vogue* caught up with *CosmoGirl*, with circulation consistently above one million despite a slow decrease in full-page advertisements (Fernandez). However, by the 2010s social media applications such as Instagram and Snapchat created a proliferous influencer culture<sup>4</sup> that teen magazines struggled to keep up with. As the world of online advertising grew, there was less and less incentive for large fashion corporations to continue to buy page-sized print ads, especially when *Teen Vogue*'s target market primarily relied on the money of other family members, as opposed to their own disposable income.

Astley, who left college aiming to work in the worlds of interior design and journalism, describes her vision for the magazine as "girl-centric," placing a specific emphasis on aesthetics, personal creativity, and décor (Murg n.d., n.p.). A well-known staple of each print copy of *Teen Vogue* was the "A Room of My Own" feature on the final page, which displayed the room of an actual teen girl and speaks to the specificity of the curation of self during teen years (Murg n.d., n.p.).

Aside from these staples, Astley speaks about creating a sense of honest, quirky expression within the realm of fashion and beauty. This format went directly against the grain established by magazines marketed toward a similar demographic such as *Tiger Beat* and *J-14*, which spoke primarily about relationships (always in a heteronormative context) and the newest boyish young heartthrobs. In a time shortly before the proliferation of mainstream feminism connecting with younger audiences on social media, *Teen Vogue* was relatively progressive, insisting on addressing young girls as individuals with their own specific interests, rather than pre-teens intrinsically tied to a desire for male attention.

### **Phillip Picardi Transforms the Digital Scene**

After leaving *Teen Vogue* for a stint as a senior beauty editor at Refinery29,<sup>5</sup> Phillip Picardi, a young creative and New York University grad, returned to Astley's team as the digital director of TeenVogue.com (Fernandez 2017). Astley effectively gave Picardi the power to start producing more politically progressive content on the web, which had always been left on the back burner in favor of the perfection of the production of the print magazine (Fernandez 2017).

Picardi took an aggressive approach, pushing his digital team to produce at an increased rate so they could throw a lot of content at their readership and monitor what stuck. The magazine continued to profile fashion, beauty, and entertainment, but also covered sociopolitical issues such

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<sup>4</sup> Influencer culture refers to the proliferation of sponsored posts and advertisements on the social media accounts of individuals with large followings. This recent development in the virtual economy has revolutionized corporate marketing strategies.

<sup>5</sup> Refinery29 is a women-centric publication and entertainment company which covers everything from the latest in beauty to pressing sociopolitical issues (Refinery29 n.d.).

as abortion, birth control, racism and policing, LGBTQ+ rights, and a variety of other concerns (Fernandez 2017). This work required stepping on the toes of Condé Nast administration, as the business-focused executives wished to maintain a reliable strategy to bring in revenue (Fernandez 2017). Additionally, *Teen Vogue* risked the loyalties of an array of readers who were familiar with the publication and did not wish for the content to change. Despite these roadblocks, with perseverance, Picardi paved the way for the early stages of a drastic rebrand.

In the first half of 2015 unique views on the *Teen Vogue* website were around 3.1 million; however, this number jumped to 4.2 million in the latter half of the year (Fernandez 2017). Despite this obvious success, social media platforms were littered with indignant complaints from regular readers and readers' parents about the new direction the magazine was taking. In the eyes of the Condé Nast administration, the print version maintaining its initial branding and content appeared to be the only thing tethering the magazine's readership to continued subscription. Fearful of alienating their established audience, some members of the team pushed to confine the topic expansion to the website (Fernandez 2017). Additionally, if the brand transferred the digital content over to the print they would risk losing their already dwindling sponsors, who may not want their name associated with the political opinions of *Teen Vogue's* editorial staff. Entering the 2010s, *Teen Vogue* was a lone wolf in the dying teenage print journalism market, thus, taking risks did not necessarily align with the goal of sustaining their audience in a field slowing its traction. Despite these concerns, Picardi's boldness had already set the ball rolling, turning heads that did not previously have *Teen Vogue* on their radar for nuanced, controversial political takes.

### **The Death of Print**

Given the import of *Teen Vogue's* digital presence, it is necessary to consider the context of digital versus print in contemporary journalism. The expansion of the internet directly correlates with a downturn in sales for print publications. As individuals can now consume their news the moment it happens via a variety of media from Twitter to podcast streaming to the Google search bar, there is less demand for physical magazines and newspapers.

In the first chapter of *The Changing Business of Journalism and its Implications for Democracy*, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and David A.L. Levy lay out the three primary problems facing the print journalism sector in contemporary society: the circulation downturn exacerbated by the 2008 recession, increased competition due to the expansion of technology, and inability to keep up with social, economic, and political issues (2011). Nielsen and Levy go on to argue that society is presently engaged in the beginning of a transformation in media in which journalists will have to adapt their work to remain relevant. This means that initially many journalists, due to shifting visions in administration and inability to acclimate, will likely lose their jobs. Journalism will also become more rigorous as readers expect news to be readily available, as opposed to a crafted story meant for the page (Levy 2011).

Nielsen and Levy make a point to debunk the myth that the Internet will kill print publications, using a global perspective to display how the issue is primarily Western. While the excess of consumption integral to American culture results in a need to absorb more faster, making virtual news more desirable, in other parts of the world the print business is flourishing. Additionally, this is in large part due to the impacts of the 2008 recession, which are felt more heavily in America. The American print business gets approximately 87% of its revenue from advertisements, whereas nations like Germany and Finland accrue about 50% of their revenue from ads (Levy 2011). Between 2007 and 2009 print newspaper circulation decreased an astounding average of 8.7% (Barthelemy 2011, 10). This 8.7% drop occurred again between the

months of March and October of 2010 (Barthelemy 2011, 10). Although this paper addresses a magazine, these figures are still relevant as the fields are interconnected, as all publications beneath the umbrella of print are suffering.

In an analysis of the future of print, researchers at Columbia University identified what they referred to as the “twin crises” in the print industry: decreases in circulation and advertising profits, as well as the expansion of free content online (Barthelemy 2011, 12). Access to free information de-incentivizes consumers from purchasing what they could likely find themselves on the internet. These twin crises are defined by three primary issues: a shift in consumer behavior, expansion in information accessibility, and the reallocation of corporate advertising funds (Barthelemy 2011). Considering these factors, it must be re-emphasized that adaptability is the only way forward for journalism. Without becoming malleable, print will potentially become obsolete. Given this context, *Teen Vogue*, with its already markedly smaller page size, thrived digitally, but struggled to justify monthly print releases to a dwindling audience coming off an intense global economic catastrophe.

### **The Rise of Elaine Welteroth**

After spending 13 years building what had become an iconic newsstand staple, Amy Astley announced in early 2016 that she was stepping down as the EIC of *Teen Vogue* and headed to another Condé Nast publication, *Architectural Digest*, to pursue her dream of running an interior design magazine (Fernandez 2017). While talk of folding *Teen Vogue* into *Vogue* circulated, Condé Nast faced multiple intertwined administrative decisions concerning the magazine’s future. Who had the energy and vision to take over for Astley? Should the digital and print versions of the magazine better align content-wise moving forward? Would a digital only approach work better? Should the magazine even continue running? Enter Elaine Welteroth.

While *Teen Vogue* was gaining traction and making a name for itself in the world of teenage journalism, Elaine Welteroth was graduating from California State University with a degree in communications and media studies and a minor in journalism (Into the Gloss 2019). Unaware of which direction she was headed post-grad, Welteroth stumbled across Harriet Cole, an editor, entrepreneur, and writer who, according to Welteroth, sat right at the “intersection of black culture, style, and spirituality” (Into the Gloss 2019, n.p.). After scouring the Internet to conduct her research, Welteroth worked up the courage to email Cole, who at that time was working at the small, but prolific *Ebony* magazine. Luckily Welteroth’s email was welcomed with open arms, and she landed a lower-level position at the magazine because of her correspondence with Cole. Working her way up the chain of command, Welteroth eventually built *Ebony*’s beauty and style department from the ground up, putting herself on the radar of prominent people in the field and paving the way for her future career moves (Into the Gloss, 2019, n.p.).

After running *Ebony*’s beauty and style department singlehandedly, Welteroth pivoted to *Glamour*, eventually landing a position as Senior Beauty editor, until she got the call that would change everything. Eva Chen, then the current Beauty and Health Director at *Teen Vogue*, was stepping down and they needed someone with a vision to fill her shoes (Fernandez 2017). They needed Elaine Welteroth.

In 2012, at just 25 years old, Welteroth became the first black beauty editor at a Condé Nast publication in the company’s over a century long history (Hirsch 2019). The game changed entirely when Picardi returned to *Teen Vogue* in 2015 and Astley, perhaps armed with a sense of abandon knowing she was going to exit soon, wanted to take more risks. Despite Welteroth’s junior position as the beauty director, in July of 2015 Astley temporarily gave her the cover editor

position (Fernandez 2017). Welteroth had executive power on the shoot and wrote the cover story “The Three New Faces of Fashion You Need to Know.”

Most magazines, specifically the teenage magazines that were still circulating, kept themselves on a strict traditional celebrity cover only regime, but this *Teen Vogue* issue was a distinct break from custom, with three up and coming black models gracing the cover: Imaan Hammam, Aya Jones, and Lineisy Montero (Fernandez 2017). The cover signaled to the rest of the industry that *Teen Vogue* was divesting from the norm to become a frontrunner for conversation and representation surrounding diversity in fashion. This was followed by a succession of politically candid cover stars from Amandla Stenberg to Simone Biles, two persons of color who are notoriously outspoken about politics and social issues (Fernandez 2017). Despite this burst in energy and creativity, print sales were still falling, signaling to the editorial staff that perhaps their newsstand readership was not yet ready to hear what they had to say (Fernandez 2017). Anna Wintour approached Astley about the *Architectural Digest* position in mid-2015, but the Condé administration kept the turnover quiet until they could come up with an official plan for how to proceed (Hirsch 2019). The choice was beyond just an administrative decision: it signaled to the rest of the industry and their remaining sponsors how *Teen Vogue* was going to be using its voice, especially with a polarizing presidential election just around the corner.

### **The Reign of the Triumvirate**

While the actual hiring processes and internal conversations are not public information, Condé Nast announced in May of 2016 that *Teen Vogue* would be taking an unconventional approach to leadership as Astley departed (Fernandez 2017). The administration decided to replace her with a triumvirate: Elaine Welteroth would be in charge of print, Phillip Picardi would continue work on the website as the digital director, and Marie Suter<sup>6</sup> would be the creative director (Fernandez 2017). The editorial staff then did not have a clear higher up, alternatively reporting to all three members. While the visions of these three players aligned with a more aggressively progressive approach centering around youth engagement with the sociopolitical atmosphere, the trifecta dynamic left industry players with questions. Would the magazine be moving forward without a named editor-in-chief? Would print and digital now work more in tandem with one another? Was Condé Nast lowballing Welteroth? Did it potentially have something to do with her age and/or race?

Moving forward, Picardi and Welteroth sought to find common ground and solidify a more cohesive brand image than what previously existed, making very intentional moves going into the summer of 2016 and the politically tumultuous fall. Beneath Astley the tagline for *Teen Vogue* was a simple “fashion starts here,” but beneath the triumvirate the vision pivoted to “the young person’s guide to saving the world...” (Murg n.d., n.p.). Despite this redirection in content, the *Teen Vogue* editorial staff also made a point to maintain the integrity of the magazine by intermixing these more sobering issues with the traditional fashion, beauty, and entertainment profiles. By doing this, they were able to create a journalistic culture which addressed the whole individual and recognized that all these elements of life are intertwined.

In November of 2016, Condé Nast announced its intent to shift the magazine’s print schedule to quarterly to funnel more resources into the digital production (Wertheim 2017). This allowed for the triumvirate to expand their team of regular content writers, and they made a specific point of sourcing talent from outside the realm of strictly women’s journalism to connect with

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<sup>6</sup> Marie Suter is a well-known creative director (CD) in American journalism. Beyond *Teen Vogue*, she has also been the creative director at *W Magazine*, *Allure*, and *Them*. Presently, she is the CD at Glossier, a contemporary makeup company (Bauck 2018).

individuals from diverse backgrounds (Wertheim 2017). Shortly after this, Lauren Duca's "Donald Trump is Gaslighting America" op-ed went viral, officially placing *Teen Vogue* amongst the ranks of prolific publications working to be introspective and boldly call attention to injustice in America's political framework. In January of 2017, there were around 10.4 million monthly unique views on the *Teen Vogue* website, but by April there were 12.4 million (Fernandez 2017).

Despite the magazine's burgeoning success, there was ongoing internal conversation circulating about the lack of a formal editor-in-chief, with many believing that Welteroth was snubbed for a position she was well qualified for despite her age. The print magazine displayed continual success, so to industry professionals the divestment from print appeared to be a pointed message of lack of confidence in her leadership. Welteroth is credited by Condé Nast with singlehandedly increasing *Teen Vogue* print subscriptions by 535% from 2016-2017, a rapid increase, especially considering the context of the decline of teenage journalism in the 2010s (Into the Gloss 2019). From 2016-2017 print subscriptions went up 2.8% to an astounding 940,000 copies and single magazine sales went up 4% to 22,600 copies (Fernandez 2017).

In April of 2017, after observing her vast success, administration decided to move forward with officially naming Welteroth the editor-in-chief, if only to clarify the chain of command for the editorial staff (Hirsch 2019). While this may have seemed like a step forward, Welteroth's offered salary was reportedly embarrassingly low for an individual in her position at a prominent corporation. Anna Wintour herself delivered the news, saying it was allegedly "non-negotiable." On the topic of her pay Welteroth said: "Doesn't this seem contradictory given that this company publishes stories every day encouraging women to advocate for themselves and to negotiate their salaries?" (Hirsch 2019, n.p.).

Shortly after her promotion, Welteroth had to walk into the fire of salary negotiations on her own, facing a large corporation as a young black woman who, instead of being handed a seat at the table, fought her way into the room. Anxious about how the proceedings may go as she was a first-generation college student who did not have wealth to fall back onto, Welteroth consulted a friend of hers, who happened to be a white man with a privileged intersectional identity. He advised her to "ask anyway," despite any security concerns she may have (Connley 2019). Welteroth moved into negotiations working "to borrow the privileged mindset" of her advisor, ultimately securing the salary she felt she deserved (Connley 2019). While the intimate details of said negotiations are not public knowledge, Welteroth has shared that she was eventually appropriately compensated (Connley 2019).

### ***Teen Vogue* Goes Digital and Welteroth Exits**

In November of 2017, Condé Nast reported a large-scale downsizing across all of its magazines, which included ending print publication at *Teen Vogue* despite its skyrocketing subscription numbers (Wertheim 2017). While rumors had spread since Astley's departure about the potential for the magazine to fold into *Vogue* and go exclusively digital, beneath Welteroth's supervision it did not appear to audiences that this was still longer a possibility, despite the move to a quarterly print release schedule. Although its peers faded away with the rise of social media and influencer culture, *Teen Vogue* stood the test of time by adapting and refusing to underestimate the breadth of interests of its readership. To many, the announcement felt like the official departure from an iconic and distinct era of teenage journalism.

The news came as a shock to Welteroth, who had just that year been officially named editor-in-chief after going through tumultuous salary negotiations. In response, Welteroth said "that wasn't the vision that I had for the future of *Teen Vogue*" (Hirsch 2019, n.p.). Forced to

reconsider how her work was being valued in the spaces she orbited, Welteroth chose to leave the magazine world in early 2018, going on to write a *New York Times* bestselling memoir *More Than Enough: Claiming Space for Who You Are (No Matter What They Say)* and work in television as a writer for ABC's "Black-ish" and "Grown-ish," as well as appearing as a host of CBS's daytime talk show *The Talk* ("Elaine Welteroth – The Talks Cast Member" n.d.).

Despite objective success, Welteroth, perhaps due to her age and race, was not given proper recognition or treatment by the Condé Nast administration. No longer a recognizable drugstore find, *Teen Vogue* relies on monopolizing teenage access to the Internet and virality. Though the publication still enjoys success and profits from its effective rebrand, its transition to digital marked the end of aesthetic imagery of teenage print journalism. As previously mentioned, Welteroth has enjoyed advancement in work environments which have rewarded her tenacity and vision, but *Teen Vogue* has cycled through almost three editors in the time since she's left, unable to maintain an individual in a position which offers creative potential but is ultimately limited by the control of a tight-gripped administration.

Despite data which points to the contrary, the popular narrative circling within the journalism community points to the death of print media. To resist complacency and break glass ceilings, Condé Nast—the biggest name in American journalism to date—must be willing to uplift minds such as Welteroth, re-emphasize shelf-life and visuals, and, most importantly, be willing to take risks.



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