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J Walter Thompson Company Collection (review)

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J. Walter Thompson Company Collections
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The J. Walter Thompson Company (JWT) archive is unique in being one of the most complete records of an advertising company in existence. This provides not only a singular source for researchers but one that is capable of offering many interesting possibilities for inter-disciplinary scholarship.

As a journalism historian, I was surprised to find myself engaging with the content of the archive but, like many, the pandemic had disrupted my current research projects and I had begun to explore long-forgotten lists of future research topics. One of these was an interest in inter-war magazine advertising in Britain and the United States and it was this that piqued my curiosity in the JWT archive.

J. Walter Thompson is one of America's oldest advertising agencies and one that forensically collected information and documentation on its operations, not only in the U.S. but around the world. The agency was one of the original Madison Avenue agencies depicted so well in the television series *Mad Men*. As in many such agencies, women featured prominently among the copywriting staff, especially working on advertising that was aimed at the female consumer such as skincare products. One of these products, Pond's Cold Cream, is the centre of my research project and it is notable that JWT and Pond's had a commercial relationship that lasted from 1886 to 1970, a timescale that is rarely found in the history of advertising. The JWT collection spans 5,000 linear feet and documents the company's operations from the nineteenth century to the early 2000s. Clearly, such a resource is something both to cherish and a daunting level of detail for the historian, especially one located almost 4,000 miles from Durham, NC.

Such an extensive collection offers a surprisingly limited amount of digitized material but, on further exploration, some of the company's extensive newsletter archives have been made available in digital form. These documents, numbering some 1,686 separate items, can be searched and downloaded, adding to their usefulness. The insights that await the media historian from these apparently ephemeral documents are manifold.

The newsletter collections tell the story of the agency from the inside, offering a distinct perspective that spans the agency's operations from 1916 to 2005. They appear in various formats from stapled, typewritten pages to glossy periodicals that are themselves an interesting indicator of the evolution of this form of communication. They demonstrate that the agency and its staff were very aware of the relationship between their clients and the media and that they spent a considerable time reflecting on how this could be improved. The newsletters are also an interesting example of the narratives that the agency developed about itself, for both internal and external audiences. The success of particular advertising campaigns was often analysed forensically. In 1926, the agency studied what they termed the 'pulling power' of the well-known women used in the Pond's advertising campaigns. They discovered that using European royalty resonated better with American magazine readers than American socialites which presented something of a dilemma for the agency and clearly

ran contrary to their expectations. They continued to utilise women from both continents in Pond's campaigns until the 1940s when American women were used almost exclusively. The newsletters also offer insights into the strategies deployed by the agencies leading figures such as Stanley Resor, the head of the firm and his wife, Helen Landsdowne Resor, a copywriter. There is evidence of an increasing determination to use real people in advertising to add a human-interest dimension that was presumed to be of greater value to the reader. This began with the use of well-known actresses in the 1920s and progressed to the society beauties of the 1930s and 1940s. The women used were usually paid for their time and had to be genuine users of the skincare products, reflecting an increasing sophistication and media awareness in the developing audience. Indeed, such was the agency's adeptness in research, that they were hired by publications such as the British *Daily Mirror* newspaper to undertake research on their markets.

Given the size and diversity of the collection, it is perhaps surprising that so little has been digitised. For those of us accessing the collection at a distance, this represents quite a barrier to our work. It would be very helpful to digitise other aspects of the agency's collections alongside the newsletters, such as the domestic advertisements collection of 300,000 items. Even a small amount of this collection would be a terrific counterpoint to the digitised items and would allow historians to map trends in advertising and how the relationship between product, agency and media developed over time.