

# **BLURRING FAME AND INFAMY: A Content Analysis of Cover-Story Trends in People Magazine\***

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This article reports the results obtained in two studies of People magazine. In Study I, using 1,253 People cover stories as a basis, we examined characteristics of and changes in cultural celebrities over the magazine's first twenty-five years of publication. Our results suggest that, from 1974 to 1998, the cover themes of issues of People magazine shifted away from celebrity careers to a preoccupation with the stars' personal problems—illnesses, crime, and family/sex issues. Over the decades, moreover, the basis for People celebrities appearing in a cover story became decidedly more negative. During the early years, most of the stars were on People's cover because they had accomplished a virtuous objective. More recently, however, the magazine heaped attention—perhaps inordinate attention—on the “accomplishments” of rapists, child abusers, drug addicts, and murderers. In Study II, we compared People cover celebrities in the year before (N=53) and after (N=50) September 11, 2001. Our results suggest that the tone of magazine cover stories was generally more positive after the 9/11 terrorist attack. Thus, the Attack on America may have had the unintended consequence of shifting our attention back to virtuous celebrities—heroes—rather than villains.*

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In 1968, when he predicted that everyone would soon be world famous for 15 minutes, even Andy Warhol could not have foreseen the astounding rise of celebrity as it would come to pervade turn-of-the-century mass culture. In response to the growing influence of the entertainment industry, a new genre of “star” biographies, gossip columns, magazines, television programs, and souvenirs –saturated with images of “mega-fame” ;and “mega-stardom”--soon established itself in the popular arts (Gitlin, 1998). In recognition of its enormous commercial potential, the business of celebrity spawned a number of new professions and sub-industries including personality journalism and photography, entertainment law, public relations, souvenir sales, managers and agents, and groomers and trainers (Gamson, 1994).

At the same time, it is nothing new for Americans to single out certain of its members for special attention. Throughout its history, American society has lavished celebrity status on a range of human beings considered exemplary or extraordinary including generals, patriots, presidents and other national politicians (Gitlin, 1998).

During the opening decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, moreover, Americans heaped adulation on “idols of production” (Lowenthal, 1961). These were the industrial tycoons who served as role models for the countless citizens who accepted a secularized version of the Protestant Ethic and the American Dream. Inspired by their heroes’ successes in the business arena, numerous Americans—as a “sign” of self-worth if not religious salvation--sought to accumulate large amounts of money.

By mid-century, however, Americans began to turn their attention away from industrial giants and toward “idols of consumption”—the entertainers and sports figures who filled the leisure hours with music, drama, and athletic prowess (Lowenthal, 1961). This transition coincided with the development of an entire industry dedicated to creating and selling celebrity. Hence, the growing popularity of a host of printed and electronic media including television entertainment magazines (e.g., *Entertainment Tonight*, *Access Hollywood*, and *Extra*), late-night talk shows (e.g., *Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *David Letterman*, and *Conan O’Brien*), supermarket tabloids (e.g., *National Enquirer*, *Star*, *Globe*), and celebrity magazines (e.g., *People*).

Within the popular arts, *People* magazine has long dominated the newsstand with its celebrity stories (Shaw, 1994). For more than a quarter century, *People’s* feature articles have focused on the professional and private lives of star players from Hollywood, Wall Street, and Washington D.C., frequently blurring the distinction between entertainment and news, between celebrity and hero, between politician and performer. Every week, more than 36 million Americans read the pages of *People*, making it one of the most popular and commercially successful magazines in the history of the United States (Heiskell, 1998; *The Write News*, 1998). In light of its unchallenged circulation figures over decades, it seems reasonable to suggest that *People* magazine reflects, and perhaps also affects, a great deal about the state of celebrity in contemporary American popular culture.

## STUDY I

We conducted two separate but related studies of *People* magazine celebrities. In Study I, we sought to determine how those individuals featured by the most popular celebrity magazine in the United States were portrayed over a recent period of time. Using *People* cover stories as a basis, we studied characteristics of and changes in cultural celebrities over twenty-five years. Specifically, we identified the age, sex, race, and occupation of *People* celebrities and studied how depictions of their behavior had changed over time. In this regard, we hypothesized that traditional notions of celebrity may have recently become broadened to include the darker side of human nature; more specifically, focusing more attention on those members of society who engage in sleazy, even vicious, acts of deviance or crime. As a consequence, the distinction between fame and infamy may have been blurred.

**Method:** Using appropriate coding sheets, each of the 1,253 covers of issues of *People* from its inception in 1974 through 1998 was scrutinized for various characteristics of the celebrity and the overall tone of the cover presentation. Three coders, all students at Northeastern University, were trained in the definitions all categories and in the use of coding sheets. Working independently, they recorded the information for each cover on a separate coding sheet including the race, age, sex, and occupational status of the primary celebrity, the theme of the cover copy that explained the reason for highlighting the celebrity (career, illness, crime/deviance, and family/sex), and the overall tone—whether positive or negative—of the cover including its images and copy. Only covers that featured a distinguishable human being were subjected to analysis. Forty-two covers that failed to meet or exceed a two out of three standard for agreement among

coders as to a primary celebrity were excluded from consideration. Most such covers depicted either a number of celebrities, none of whom was given the spotlight, or non-human figures e.g., cartoon characters or muppets.

Inter-coder reliability was initially tested by having the three coders examine two covers for each calendar year, yielding a sample of fifty covers. A two out of three criterion yielded mean agreement among coders of 98.67%, ranging between 94 percent of the sample covers for its overall tone (positive vs. negative) to 100 percent for the celebrity's age, gender, race, and occupation. Using a three out of three criterion, there was mean agreement among coders of 85 percent, ranging from 60 percent for overall tone to 100 percent for gender and race.

**Findings:** Results obtained in Study I suggest that demographic characteristics of celebrities on *People* covers were similar to characteristics featured in many other forms of popular culture (Gerbner, 1998). Thus, the celebrity world of *People* magazine was over-represented by white young adults—almost 92 percent of the cover celebrities were white; only slightly more than six percent were black, and only one percent were either Asian or Latino. Moreover, more than 48 percent of *People* celebrities were between the ages of 21 and 36, whereas barely 17 percent were over 50. Only findings for gender were at odds with those found in forms of popular culture generally. Almost 58 percent of all cover celebrities were females, a finding that may reflect the fact that a disproportionate number of *People* readers are women rather than men (Heiskell, 1998). For the same reason, there is an over-representation of female characters in daytime television programs, whose audience is dominated by women (Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1981).

An analysis of the occupational status of cover celebrities suggested the continuing influence of idols of consumption rather than production. Fully 70 percent of all *People* celebrities came from fields of entertainment or professional sports including TV personalities, movie actors, musicians, directors, producers, and athletes. By contrast, only 1 percent of all celebrities represented the leadership of business and industry, and more than 11 percent were political figures.

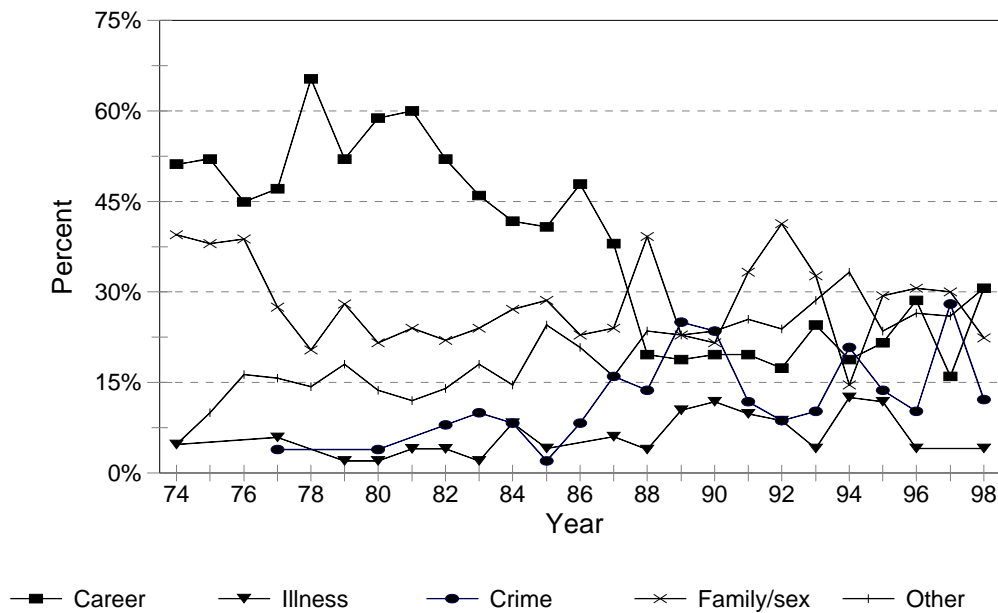
As shown in Table 1, the tone of cover stories varied by the race, age, and gender of celebrities. As expected, young adults (78%) and whites (75%) were especially likely to be singled out for some positive accomplishment in their career or personal life. Yet, the results obtained for gender were not so clear-cut. Notwithstanding the over-presentation of females on *People* covers, male celebrities were slightly more likely than their female counterparts (75 percent for males versus 73 percent for females) to be depicted in a positive light.

Table 1: Characteristics of Celebrity by Tone of Cover Story, 1974-1998

Characteristics of Primary Cover Celebrity		Tone of Cover Story		
		N	Positive	Negative
Age				
	Under 20	95	54.7%	45.3%
	21-35	588	78.1%	21.9%
	36-50	314	72.3%	27.7%
	Over 50	214	75.2%	24.8%
	Total	1,211	74.2%	25.8%
Sex				
	Male	521	75.4%	24.6%
	Female	704	72.6%	27.4%
	Total	1,225	73.8%	26.2%
Race				
	White	1,118	74.6%	25.4%
	Black	75	66.7%	33.3%
	Other	37	64.9%	35.1%
	Total	1,225	73.8%	26.2%

As shown in Figure 1, the cover themes of issues of *People* magazine shifted during the magazine's early years away from an examination of celebrity careers to a description of celebrities' personal problems—illnesses, crime, and family/sex issues. In 1974, more than 51 percent of all cover stories focused on celebrities' career accomplishments—on Broadway, in Hollywood, in Washington D.C., and so on. But by 1988, only 20 percent of *People* covers portrayed celebrities' career achievements, opting instead to feature some aspect of their personal lives.

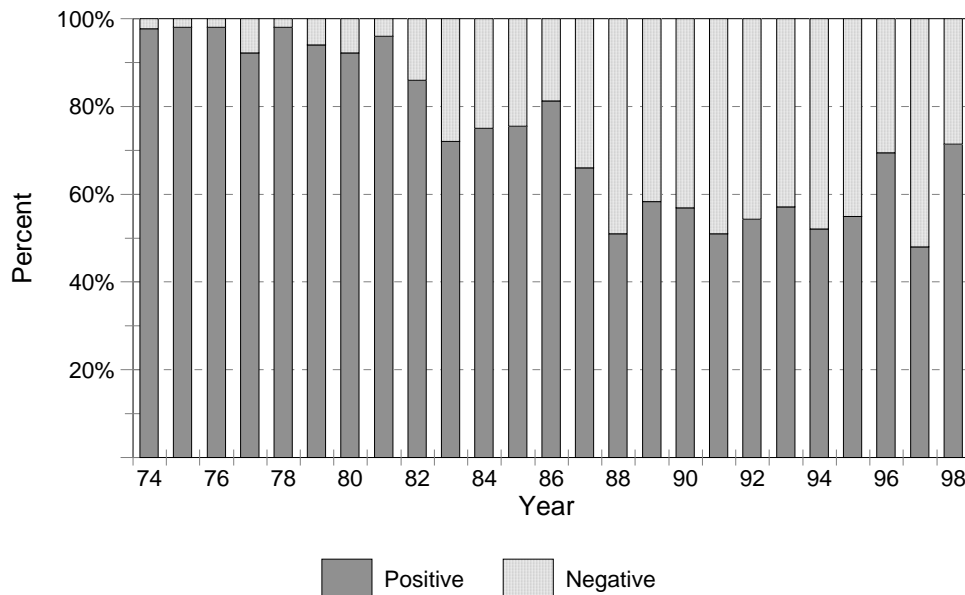
Figure 1: Changes in People Magazine Cover Story Theme



The results shown in Figure 2 suggest that, over the decades, the basis for *People* celebrities appearing in a cover story became dramatically more negative. During the early years of its publication, most of the stars were on *People*'s cover because they had accomplished a positive goal. In 1974, during its first year of publication, less than 3 percent of all *People* celebrities were featured for negative reasons such as drug or alcohol dependence, child abuse, or the commission of a violent crime. Many had instead overcome a personal problem—for example, in August, 1975, *People* highlighted Cher's relationship with musician Greg Allman—"She helps him stay off heroin--and his band is hot again." In February 1979, the magazine focused on singer John Denver who discussed "his adopted children and what it took to save his marriage." Also during the early years, celebrities were featured because they had accomplished a career

objective. For example, in January 1977, new star Jessica Lange was applauded for her role in the film *King Kong*. In September 1977, Dan Rather was depicted as the anchorman to follow Walter Cronkite. In July, 1978, Olivia Newton-John’s career was characterized as having taken off since her role with John Travolta in the film *Grease*.

Figure 2: Changes in People Magazine Cover Story Tone



By 1988 and continuing through the 1990s, there was a major reversal in tone, so that almost half of all *People* cover stories focused not on celebrities’ positive accomplishments, but on their untoward characteristics: For example, in July 1996, Margaux Hemingway was identified as “Tragic Beauty—She was a supermodel at 19, then fell hard. Here is the inside story of her troubled life—and sad death at 41.” In March, 1993, revelations about Sarah Ferguson’s personal problems were depicted as “The Ugly Truth.” In November 1993, the cover story about

Michael Jackson focused on “Sex, drugs, and the fall of the world’s biggest star.” In September 1995, Macaulay Culkin’s family relations were depicted as a “Brawl in the Family.” In January, 1994, the plot against ice-skater Nancy Kerrigan was called “Terror on Ice.”

Along with musicians, athletes, and political figures, *People* for the first time also featured violent criminals. In October 1992, the magazine ran a story about “Lethal Lolita. Amy Fisher, 18, shot her alleged lover’s wife—and unleashed a shocking tale of sex, greed, and betrayal.” In March 1998, the cover story about a teacher convicted of statutory rape of her sixth grade student focused on “Their Bizarre Story of Obsessive Love.” In December 1993, a story about the woman who excised her husband’s penis was entitled “The Cut Felt Round the World: War of the Bobbitts.” In March 1993, a profile of Waco cultist David Koresh was characterized as “The Evil Messiah.” In December 1994, serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer’s murder was viewed as “Death of a Madman.” In March 1995, readers were asked about the conviction of Susan Smith who drowned her two sons, “Does She Deserve to Die?”

## **STUDY II**

Study II was designed to compare cover depictions of *People* celebrities in the 12-month periods before and after the September 11, 2001 Attack on America. The question guiding our research was whether the terrorist attack had initiated a shift in American popular culture, so that the positive attributes rather than the misdeeds of celebrities were being displayed with greater frequency.

**Method:** Using the same coding sheets as in Study I, each of the 53 covers of *People* issues from September 2, 2000 through September 5, 2001 and the 50 *People* covers from September 12, 2001 through September 1, 2002 was content-analyzed for various characteristics of the celebrity and the overall tone of the cover presentation. Two coders, both students at Northeastern University, were trained in the definitions of all categories and in the use of coding sheets. Working independently and using the same rules as in Study I, they recorded the information for each cover on a separate coding sheet. Working separately, the coders agreed about overall tone for 78 percent of the covers; after discussing their differences, the agreement between them increased to 95 percent. Only five covers were excluded because of lack of inter-coder agreement. Another twenty-four were omitted from the analysis because they depicted either a number of celebrities, none of whom was given the spotlight, or non-human figures e.g., cartoon characters or muppets.

**Findings:** The prevalence of murderers featured on *People* covers hardly changed as a result of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack—6 percent prior to 9/11; 7 percent in its aftermath. Similarly, there was little change overall in the depiction of celebrity sex and family life—27% of all covers before the terrorist attack versus 31% afterwards or of celebrity illnesses—12% before versus 10% in its aftermath.

Prior to the attack on America, celebrity careers were highlighted on 18 percent of all covers; after 9/11, this figure rose to 22 percent. Before the terrorist attack, 6 percent of the covers included celebrity superlatives; in its aftermath, almost 13 percent contained positive references

to the celebrities they featured. Moreover, the tone of celebrity cover stories improved markedly between time periods. Prior to the Attack on America, the tone was negative in 26 percent of the cover stories; afterwards, this figure declined to only 14 percent.

Following 9/11, *People* presented more good news about its celebrities. In March, 2002, for example, it ran a cover story about “Rosie’s Brave Step,” in “coming out” regarding her sexual orientation. In December, 2001, Faith Hill was featured with Tim McGraw about the birth of their third child. In July 2002, there was a cover story about Julia Roberts’ wedding to cameraman Danny Moder; in October, 2001, there was a feature about Jennifer Lopez’s wedding. The Spring 2002 issue highlighted Jennifer Anniston’s stylish fashions. In addition, *People* ran positively slanted stories directly related to the attack on America—“America Unites,” “The Stars Pitch in,” and “A Celebration of the American Spirit.”

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Throughout much of the American history of celebrity, stardom was typically bestowed on those regarded as paragons of virtue, either because of their business acumen, ability to entertain, competitive achievements, great courage, or unusual talents. In certain cases, criminals also received inordinate public attention, but usually because they were regarded as “Robin Hood” types, whose victims—banks and large corporations—were widely viewed as exploitative and unethical (Kooistra, 1989). In some cases, of course, very influential villains also received attention, but only so long as they were newsworthy and only in media specializing in news of a

political, economic, or legal character. For example, Adolph Hitler made seven covers of *Time*; Joseph Stalin was on twelve.

Results obtained in Study I suggest that the basis for celebrity status may have undergone an important change from the 1970s through the end of the twentieth century in the cover stories of *People* magazine, if not in popular culture generally. Along with idols of consumption who are recognized for their exemplary careers or personal lives, we more recently also heaped attention—perhaps inordinate attention—on the “accomplishments” of rapists, child abusers, drug addicts, and murderers. Such villains are not noteworthy for their pervasive political or economic influence; nor are they admired because they attack victims who are themselves widely regarded as exploitative or evil. During the closing decades of the twentieth century, the celebrity criminals featured in *People*—not unlike their counterparts who sing, dance, or perform in major motion pictures—simply entertained the masses with their spectacular and bizarre criminal behavior. Former *People* editor Richard Stolley may have recognized this shift in emphasis when he suggested in 1977, “We haven’t changed the concept of the magazine; we’re just expanding the concept of star” (Gamson, 1994; p. 46).

Yet featuring villainous celebrities may represent only part of a larger trend in American popular culture, in which nastiness has more generally come to assume a prominent position. In the face of intense competition for sales and ratings, the producers of the popular arts, eager to capture the largest possible share of the media market, have introduced more and more horrific depictions (Shaw, 1994). To an increasing extent, violent criminals are gratuitously being featured on t-shirts, in comic books, and on trading cards. Their artwork is being sold for

thousands of dollars and appears along with their poetry in popular books and magazines. The old fashioned “good against evil” morality plays are harder to locate, having been replaced by one despicable professional wrestler brutalizing another despicable professional wrestler, one miserable talk show guest berating (if not fist fighting) another miserable talk show guest. Moreover, motion pictures have become increasingly graphic in their portrayal of the consequences of violence, showing scenes of eviscerations, disembowelments, decapitations, and people being skinned alive (Fox and Levin, 2001).

At the same time, the print and electronic media have recently highlighted immoral or unethical behavior in national celebrities that might have been ignored twenty or thirty years ago. Clearly, prior to a spate of scandals beginning in the 1970s including Watergate, IranGate, S&L, Helmsley, Milken, Crane, Packwood, Whitewater, Clinton/Lewinsky, Condit/Levy, Enron, and Martha Stuart, many reporters and producers lived by a code of ethics that excluded divulging certain acts that might have destroyed the career of a public figure—e.g., homosexuality, drug abuse, or alcoholism. During recent years, however, intense competition has helped inspire a “no holds barred” attitude from journalists and producers of popular culture who go out of their way to report every ugly detail of their subjects private and public lives (Levin and Arluke, 1987).

Part of the increasing nastiness that seems to permeate popular culture may also be a result of a growing cynicism among Americans regarding their national celebrities (Edelstein, 1996). If so, then, the negative images in *People* cover stories may in part reflect a changing reality—the larger influence of leaders in politics, entertainment, and sports who have been discovered to engage in

immoral or unethical behavior. A recent Harris national survey of more than 1,000 Americans indicated that almost 25 percent of all Americans deleted some national figure from their list of heroes, mainly because of unethical conduct. More than half of all respondents were unable to identify any living public figure whom they considered to be heroic (Clark, 2001).

Many of our cultural celebrities are well known for their extraordinary accomplishments and heroic behavior. Some achieve fame by risking their lives or reputations to champion a good cause or rescue vulnerable victims. Others realize celebrity status because of their ability to accumulate large amounts of wealth and power or to entertain with song and dance, acting, or their athletic prowess. Many of our celebrities provide society's members with standards of comparison for inspiring and establishing various forms of excellence, whether in a career or in their personal lives.

Unfortunately, we seem also to have become infatuated with infamy. Some have suggested that scandalous celebrities serve a social comparison function for audience members who work out their own moral issues by speculating about the personal lives of the "stars" (Bird, 1997; Lull and Hinerman, 1997).

This is, however, not the whole story. By granting celebrity status to villains, we may be inadvertently providing our young people with a dangerous model for gaining national prominence. We may also be giving to the worst among us exactly what they hope to achieve—celebrity status. One serial killer made his intention known when he asked in a letter to the police, "How many times do I have to kill before I get a name in the paper or some national

attention?” The answer to his query is as clear as it is chilling: The larger a killer’s body count, the greater his potential for achieving celebrity status!

On the other hand, Study II indicates that the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack on America may have generated at least a bit of renewed interest in celebrating the exemplary behavior of heroic rather than villainous individuals. According to the Gallup News Service (Moore, 2001), 90 percent of Americans rate firefighters as “high” or “very high” in terms of honesty and integrity. Moreover, after much controversy and debate concerning whether to feature terrorist Osama Bin Laden as its “Person of the Year” for 2001, *Time* magazine decided instead to honor the mayor of New York City. Could *People* magazine be far behind?

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