

# Who Needs People?

By William Safire

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## ESSAY

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WASHINGTON—When the world's most powerful publishing empire launched "The first national weekly magazine to be started in twenty years," its executives must have asked themselves:

What will compel magazine buyers to snatch our new magazine off the newsstands? What subjects are sure-fire audience-grabbers at this point in Time, Incorporated?

Their market-researched answer is in *People*, with a \$500,000 opening-week budget promoting the 1.4 million copies of its first issue, a magazine Time describes as "attuned to the free-wheeling '70's and its mood of burning curiosity, wry detachment and tolerance for other people's manners and morals."

By their choice of topics, the *Time* people have given us a stop-action view of what they think most interests wealthy young people, their prime target audience.

By their handling of these topics, the editors give us their frank assessment of that audience: A collection of frantic, tasteless fadcats deeply concerned with social climbing and intellectual pretension, panting for a look at celebrities in poses that press agents staged back in the thirties (with wryly detached captions like "These *Playboy* Bunnies are, well, hopping mad").

Playing, well, fast and Luce with the traditions of *Time*, *Life* and *Fortune*, *People*'s first cover offers us nostalgically-coiffed, pearl-chewing Mia Farrow, star of "The Great Gatsby." There must have been a soul-searching decision at *People* whether to go with "Gatsby" or ride with "The Exorcist"; as a compromise, its "Exorcist" story is listed at the top of the list of contents on the cover.

Skimming that list (skimmers are replacing readers), *People* milks the exorcism craze with an interview that repeats what author William Peter Blatty's press agent has been grinding out for months.

On to a Kennedy-tragedy rehash, of course, the mixture as before, this time a story on Marina Oswald that stands as the one island of good writing and sensitive photography in the magazine, a reminder of what might have been.

Gloria Vanderbilt's fourth marriage is duly chronicled. Then the Solzhenitsyn craze is exploited with the phony headline—"From his own writing: A chilling account of a good man's arrest"—intended to mislead skimmers into thinking the Russian author wrote an exclusive for *People*, but it turns out to be a selection from a five-year-old book.

"Palm Beach Whirl" is listed further down on the cover, about parallel to

Miss Farrow's mouth, which is chewing the pearls that *People* now casts before its readers. In six pages of itchy-poo pictures, festooned with captions impossible to lampoon—"Mrs. George Schrafft, of the candy family, wiggles out of her scuba gear"—*Time*'s offspring presses its readers' noses against the windows of high society, breathlessly describing one old publicity hound as "The regal Mary Sanford."

Toward the bottom, the promoter formulating the cover plugs a story that uses some black-and-white stills of an auto race sent over from the reject heap at *Sports Illustrated*, and sticks in a topical entry titled "The Hearsts, During the Nightmare," which turns out to be one double-truck picture of a press conference with a brief caption.

That's about it. Also inside are two pictures of people in bathtubs, a grotesque story about fat people who wire their jaws shut and a couple of full-page photos of United States Senators making themselves look silly.

Maybe there is money in this sort of thing; if so, publishing empires whose executives harrumph about social responsibility should leave the field to upstart publishers more adept at grubbiness. *People* fails on the tawdry terms it has chosen: The sex is not sexy, the gossip not current, the exploitation not with-it. Great effort is needed to lift it up to superficiality.

*Time* Inc.'s insult to the American mass audience is compounded by the prostitution of *Time* magazine itself; in this week's press section, the spirit of promotion triumphs over editorial integrity with a story touting the new product to the extent of hawking its advertising page rates. When *Time* boss Hedley Donovan says "go," anything goes.

To reach tycoons and their moppets, the admen have decreed shallow stories about cinemactors and socialites, and pundits like me are dismayed. (Six *Time*-coined words in one sentence—you may fire when you are ready, Hedley.)

"Plan tonight to sweat less tomorrow," reads the headline of *People*'s biggest advertisement. We can hope that the many talented journalists at *Time* Inc. will do just the opposite, and will reshape and upgrade their demeaning product until it becomes a publication.

Can *People* be as vacuous as some editors think? Can *People* be turned around and made an informative medium that is also a commercial success?

*Time* will tell.