



**From Concept to Story:
Time Magazine and “America at 300 Million”
Teaching Note**

Case Summary

The publication of a magazine cover story on social trends marks the end of a complex process, at the root of which lies a fundamental challenge: how to translate a theoretical concept into a tangible story. This case is an account of one such process at *Time* Magazine. It takes place in fall 2006, when editors decided to produce an article pegged to a milestone: the US population reached 300 million. Production and editorial decisions were mostly left to the discretion of Graphics Editor Jackson Dykman. The piece was to be purely graphic in form and was slated as a possible cover story.

The case study provides background on the importance of each week’s cover story to both the editorial and financial health of the magazine. It zeroes in on the magazine’s decision to undertake an all-graphics story, and outlines the role played by the graphics department at *Time*. It then focuses on Dykman during three weeks in which he feverishly worked to accomplish the project, and highlights the many considerations and obstacles he faced along the way. It takes the reader through Dykman’s thought and planning processes as he sets about outlining, weighing, and rejecting various topics for possible inclusion in the final feature.

The case takes place against a backdrop of uncertainty regarding the fate of the piece: vagaries of the news-cycle, as well as the editor’s personal preferences, are just two factors that meant Dykman remained unsure throughout as to whether the story would be a cover, a feature inside the magazine or would simply not make the cut at the last minute. Anxious to see his vision and hard work realized, he struggled to adapt to shifting circumstances and demands. Finally, just before the magazine was due to close, Managing Editor Richard Stengel requested an entirely new feature—this one on politics—as part of the spread. Students are presented with Dykman’s dilemma: He wanted to please Stengel, but questioned what to do given the brief amount of time left, and what he saw as the political feature’s questionable relevance to the larger piece.

This Teaching Note was written by Danielle Haas for the Knight Case Studies Initiative, Graduate School of Journalism, Columbia University. Funding was provided by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. (0208)

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Teaching Objectives

This case illustrates the issues and challenges of transforming an idea or concept—in this instance creating “a mirror on America”—into actual pages in a magazine. It highlights the kind of daily decisions that editors must make—including time, space, and content prioritization: What should be included? What should be left out? How should a story be staffed? How much time should be devoted to the article? Newsroom hierarchy—above all, who ultimately decides what goes into a story—emerges as another theme, as does the related subject of intra-organizational communication and how journalists collaborate with one another. Competing personal and professional interests in the workplace, as well as the struggle to maintain quality in the face of time, personnel and other limitations are additional threads to pull from the fabric of the case.

Dykman’s deliberations over what to include in his spread makes the case study a good vehicle for discussing news judgment. The underlying impulse to produce an all-graphics story lends itself to considering the role of graphics and visuals in journalism--and their merits and demerits vis-à-vis more textual formats. Meanwhile, the statistically rooted nature of Dykman’s work could prompt debate about the promise and perils of numbers and data in journalism.

More broadly, the case lends itself to a broader debate about the challenges that newsmagazines face staying relevant as news consumers increasingly rely on the Web for breaking news. Discuss solo versus teamwork in journalism, as well as the role that covers and cover stories play in the overall magazine—and how they have changed over time. Students should think about the significance of personal goals and ambition in the newsroom, as well as the pressure within media outlets for innovation and flexibility.

Finally, the relationship between editorial content and advertising constitutes another rich area for discussion. One issue the case raises is that advertisers tend to like themed issues or “annuities” (runs every year) such as “America at 300 million,” because it allows them to target the issues in which they want to buy space. Probe this further by examining any possible implications for content.

Class Plan

Use this case in a class about magazine writing and/or editing, integrating graphics into a text narrative, or editorial decision-making.

Pre-class. Help students prepare for class by assigning the following questions:

1. What factors go into transforming a concept into a story?
2. What are some of the obstacles/challenges in that process?

3. How is information represented differently using graphics vs. text, when is it preferable to use graphics, and what are their pros and cons?

Have students prior to class fill out and submit the survey embedded in the online version of the case study (see the “Creating a Wish List” section of the online case). The students’ nominations for the five topics that they would have included in the article can then be used as a launching pad for class discussion and debate.

In-class questions. This case gives students an opportunity to be very concrete about how editorial decision-making actually works. Ask them to develop and defend an “ideal” theme for the issue. At the same time, they should gain awareness during the class discussion of the extra-editorial pressures that often drive concepts and production.

During classroom discussion, pose any of the following questions in order to promote an 80-90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

a) What happened in the case? Brief synopsis; chart of newsroom hierarchy; timeline of events; and evolution of the story.

b) What were the major decision points in the case?

c) What are the primary objectives/concerns of the editor? What are the primary objectives/concerns of Dykman? How do they match up? List on board.

This question may lead students to discuss challenges facing news magazines in the 21st century as they are forced to compete with breaking news online. Here the overall state of the industry can be linked to other of the managing editor’s concerns.

d) What is the best way of developing this particular concept—“America at 300 million”—into a story? (Analysis of Dykman’s categories, further suggestions).

e) What is the ideal relationship between a graphics editor and a managing editor?

f) What is the best way for Dykman to deal with Stengel’s request for a political spread? What factors and considerations are involved? Could he have made alternative suggestions or dealt with the situation differently?

g) What are the pros and cons of an all-graphics story? List on board.

h) How important is a news peg for a story? What are the pros and cons of “pegging” a story to an event/anniversary?

i) To what extent was this piece a product of its editors rather than its audience? One driving force is Gibbs' assertion that people love statistics (especially bad ones). But other factors also come into play, including Dykman's desire to "debunk" American myths, and the perceived need to tie the story to the 300 million statistic—and to the upcoming elections.

j) The story relies on statistics as a source of information and credibility. Is this effective? What are the ramifications of such a statistics-based approach?

k) Dykman's goal was to "illustrate who Americans are." Did the story, as we see it develop in the case, succeed in achieving this objective?

The graphics-based nature of "America at 300 million" means you may find that students lean towards critiquing the physical layout and visual elements of the article rather than the process by which they were developed. In this instance, urge them to avoid concentrating on the graphics as ends in themselves, but rather as the outcome of decision-making that is instead the primary topic of discussion.

Students should come away from the case with insight into the many, often competing, interests in the newsroom. They should have a sense of the complexity of developing a story from concept to finished product, the various points of stress within that process, the many decisions taken along the way, and the various paths that can be taken to achieve that end.

Suggested readings:

Rodney Benson, "Commercialism and Critique: California's Alternative Weeklies" in *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a Networked World* (eds.) N. Couldry and J. Curran (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), p. 111-127.

SYNOPSIS: This article helpfully complicates the widespread view that advertising is "the bogeyman to be avoided" in journalism. Focused on America's urban "alternative" weeklies, Benson finds that although almost 100 percent of their funding comes from advertising, the weeklies offer genuine critical alternatives to local and mainstream media, and exemplify a "paradoxical blend of a commercially successful yet politically and culturally radical press." His research provides a useful counter-balance to the more common anti-advertising stance of Wasserman and Calame.

Joel Best, "Telling the Truth About Damned Lies and Statistics," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 4, 2001. Excerpted from: *Damned Lies and Statistics: Untangling Numbers from the Media, Politicians, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2001.

SYNOPSIS: In this essay, excerpted from the book *Damned Lies and Statistics: Untangling Numbers From the Media, Politicians, and Activists*, University of Delaware Sociology professor Joel Best focuses on a seemingly mundane statistic: “Every year since 1950, the number of American children gunned down has doubled.” Best traces the roots of this data, and shows the unreliability of this seemingly cast-iron fact. He argues that it constitutes part of a wider problem—people treat “mutant statistics just as they do other statistics—that is, they usually accept even the most implausible claims without question,” and stresses that we “need to watch out for bad statistics.” The article helpfully relates to the use of statistics seen in Dykman’s heavily data-based spreads, and provides clear, colorful illustration of some of the dangers inherent in doing so.

<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v47/i34/34b00701.htm>

Byron Calame, “Cracks in the Wall Between Advertising and News,” *New York Times*, November 6, 2005.

SYNOPSIS: This article, written by ex-NYT public editor Byron Calame, focuses on the relationship between advertising and news at the *New York Times*. However, the issues, including the “search for revenue” and “pressures to let advertisers tie their pitches more closely to the credibility of the news column,” are equally relevant to other media outlets, and are useful to students in understanding some of the ramifications and breadth of the issue.

http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/06/opinion/06publiceditor.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

Byron Calame, “THE PUBLIC EDITOR: Scoops, Impact or Glory: What Motivates Reporters?” *New York Times*, December 3, 2006.

SYNOPSIS: In this article, Calame addresses the issue of what motivates newspaper reporters, and draws on “the hundreds of reporters with whom I’ve worked and competed” to sort out “several major driving forces” of journalists. The article’s focus on what fuels journalists can equally be applied to magazine reporters, and helps students to consider Stengel and Dykman’s actions and concerns in producing “America at 300 million.”

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9403E6DF1F3EF930A35751C1A9609C8B63>

Sarah Ellison, “How Weekly Magazines Try to Balance News on the Internet, in Print Editions,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 21, 2006.

SYNOPSIS: This article, which focuses on the dilemma that weekly magazines like *Time* face in dealing with a “perishable” product like the news, provides context for understanding the competitive and uncertain climate in which “America at 300 million” was produced.

http://online.wsj.com/public/article_print/SB115612726877140771-dv3_7ycDuJnEmlH3SOEBjzSHqfQ_20060827.html

“The Editors’ Guide to Newspaper Design,” Design Issue, *The American Editor*, April 2000, Issue 808.

SYNOPSIS: This edition of *American Editor* deals specifically with newspapers, but many of the issues addressed can fruitfully be applied to magazines, including *Time*. Useful sections that reinforce themes highlighted by the case study include: “Design is Content,” which stresses the need for journalists to “think visually” (p. 3); “Consumer mentality,” which emphasizes that readers notice visual elements first, and the need to apply that knowledge in newspapers (p. 6); and “WED days ahead,” which declares that the “newsroom marriage of writing, editing, and design serves the readers.” (p. 8)

http://www.asne.org/images/old_site/kiosk/editor/00.april/TAEApril2000small.pdf

Rachel Smolkin, “Finding a Niche: Is there a role for the weekly newsmagazines and their Web sites in a 24-7 news environment?” *American Journalism Review*, April/May 2007.

SYNOPSIS: This article, which casts weekly news magazines as grasping “for a foothold in a media landscape increasingly dominated by the Web,” contextualizes the case study by outlining the predicament facing *Time* and similar media outlets.

<http://www.ajr.org/Article.asp?id=4297>

“State of the News Media, 2007: An Annual Report on American Journalism” (magazines section)

SYNOPSIS: The annual report produced by the Project for Excellence in Journalism provides an overview of audience trends, economics, ownership, news investment, and other key elements for each of the media industry’s main sectors. The magazine section provides a comprehensive and highly accessible analysis of magazines for that year.

http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2007/narrative_magazines_intro.asp?media=8

“Business and Public Pressures” in “Striking the Balance, Audience Interests, Business Pressures and Journalists’ Values,” *The Pew Research Center for the People and The Press*, March 1999.

SYNOPSIS: The “Business and Public Pressures” section of this larger report offers a useful overview of some key financial issues affecting journalism, as well as a useful subsection that deals with corporate and advertising influences. This in turn helps frame *Time’s* interest in producing advertising-friendly special issues or annuities such as “America at 300 million.”

<http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?PageID=317>

Jessica Yellin, “Single, Female and Desperate No More,” *New York Times*, June 4, 2006.

SYNOPSIS: In 1986, *Newsweek* magazine ran a cover article that reported a 40-year-old, single, white, college-educated woman was more likely to be killed by a terrorist than to marry. Twenty years later, it retracted the “Marriage Crunch” piece, which relied on statistics—including the alleged fact that a woman who remained single at 30 had only a 20 percent chance of ever marrying and had only a 5 percent shot by 35. This article, pegged to the retraction, aids thinking about the statistically heavy content of Dykman’s piece by focusing on the ways in which numbers can be read and misread, and the potentially enormous ramifications that a given interpretation can have.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/04/weekinreview/04yellin.html?fta=y&pagewanted=all>

Daniel McGinn, “Marriage by the Numbers; Twenty years since the infamous ‘terrorist’ line, states of unions aren’t what we predicted they’d be,” *Newsweek*, June 5, 2006.

<http://www.houselustthebook.com/articles/marriage-by-the-numbers/>