

The Face of *Time*: Interpreting a Glance at The World's Newsmagazine

A Research Study of *Time* newsmagazine covers from 1998-2008

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## Abstract

As one of the oldest and still one of the most popular newsmagazines, *Time* is a tremendous force in the print mass media. A lot has changed since the newsmagazine's inception in 1923 and today's grab-and-go society decides to open the publication based on a single glance at the front cover. This research study examines every cover of the newsmagazine from the last ten years. The objective is to identify the largest news makers. Politicians, special interest, international, human interest and health news were the most significant sources of news deemed by the frequency of *Time* magazine covers. In addition, the research study discovers women and minorities are still under represented on the cover of *Time*.

## Introduction

*Time Inc. is the largest magazine publisher in the U.S. Each month, one out of every two Americans reads a Time Inc. Magazine and nearly one out of six, who are online, visits a company Web Site. (TimeInc.com, 2007)*

If one could take the pulse of history, look no further than the front cover of *Time*. Every week, for more than eight decades, the magazine has “set the news agenda by answering questions instead of just asking them,” (TimeInc.com, 2007). Today, *Time* has a worldwide audience of more than 27 million (TimeInc.com, 2007). Its front cover is undeniably the most convincing reason millions of people pick up *Time* on newsstands and in waiting rooms. The cover is essentially a weekly newsmagazine’s “front page,” presenting the most important issue at the capstone of a publication’s prime real estate.

What does the image on the cover reveal about mass media and society? It’s no secret we live in an ADD culture. With so many of us with short attention spans, the editors at *Time* are charged with the responsibility of creating a cover each week so enticing we are interested in picking up the newsmagazine in the first place. Long gone are the days when media audiences rely on print media for current news. Print news has become a sort of “weekend journalism,” – a slower-paced, more in-depth style of journalism that attempts to help readers digest the world around them. Therefore, the cover of *Time* magazine sets the agenda for this slower style which takes up so much of our time. If we are to invest so much time reading an article, we are likely to have been influenced by our first impression. Ten years of weekly first impressions is a great reflection of recent history. This research study examines the most pressing news events, deemed by *Time* covers, of the last ten years.

## Research questions

This study seeks to answer several research questions. Ranking by number of cover appearances, what does *Time* consider the most important news event of the last 10 years? What social, political, economic, and religious issues are deemed the most pressing stories of the decade? In addition, where does *Time* stand on the political spectrum – what does an examination of covers from the last ten years reveal about the political ideology of the weekly newsmagazine? Also, to what degree are women and minorities represented on the cover of the world’s largest weekly newsmagazine?

## Method (Operationalization)

The operationalization consisted of three parts: designing a code sheet, collecting/analyzing covers, and interpreting the information. Collecting the information was straight-forward. Using *Time's* online cover archive, the researcher examined *Time* newsmagazine covers from November 16, 1998 to November 18, 2008. An extensive Microsoft Excel worksheet was used to organize data from each cover into eight columns: date, cover headline, category, sub category, U.S. citizen/non U.S. citizen, male/female, and ethnicity (the last four columns were applicable only when an individual appeared on the cover). After collecting the data of 517 *Time* issues that appeared between in this timeframe, additional worksheets were created to organize the data and conceptualize it into graphs.

Designing a code sheet was one of the biggest challenges of the operationalization. Determining how, what, and why to code was an important step in the research. Every cover was coded. Defining categories was the first step. Sorting covers by news content had to be broad enough to cover 10 years worth of news, but detailed enough to be useful for interpretive presentation. 16 categories were defined, including arts & entertainment, children, corruption/scandals, crisis, economy, education, energy, health, history, human interest, international, politics, religion, science, special interest, technology, and terrorism

### Defining Categories

- Arts & entertainment included all articles concerning film, television, music, books and other literature.
- Children included all stories about children but did not take precedence of articles specifically about education.
- Corruption/scandals included articles about political and economic corruption and scandals.

- Crisis included articles about any sudden tragedy that affected many people.
- Economy included articles covering employment, personal finance, economic health (recessions/upswings), globalization, specific industries, and other economic natures.
- Education included articles about the state of or practices of schools, school performance, and higher education issues.
- Energy included articles addressing demands, resources, and innovations of energy.
- Health, also a likely self-explanatory category, included articles about health, wellness, nutrition, prevention, disease/illness, and care, and costs of health care.
- History included articles reflecting past events or people.
- Human interest included articles about specific people (living within the last 50 years).
- International included articles in which the primary focus was an event occurring beyond U.S. borders, such as the war in Iraq, conflicts between other states, the Olympics, and events occurring in other states.
- Politics included articles about U.S. politics: politicians/congress, presidents, presidential administrations, elections/candidates, political parties and the Supreme Court.
- Religion includes all articles about faith and received precedent over the history category when articles about Jesus, Easter, or similar religious individuals/events appeared.
- Science includes articles about DNA/genetics, space exploration, animals, and other areas of scientific study.
- Special Interest was a catch-all category for the wide spectrum of news events that did not neatly fit into any of the other 16 categories: topics range from the alleged Y2k crisis, controversial issues such as abortion and television censorship, immigration/border security, Elian Gonzales fiasco, and other unusual events.

- Sports was a rare category and only included articles about specific sporting achievements such as the Red Sox victory at the 2004 World Series. Articles about the Olympics were coded International and features on specific athletes were coded Human Interest.
- Technology included articles about digital innovation and the age of the internet.
- Terrorism included all articles about terrorists, terrorist activity, acts of terrorism (9/11 was exception and coded Crisis), and anti-terrorism efforts that did appear to have a more natural fit within Politics or International.

### **Deciding Who To Code**

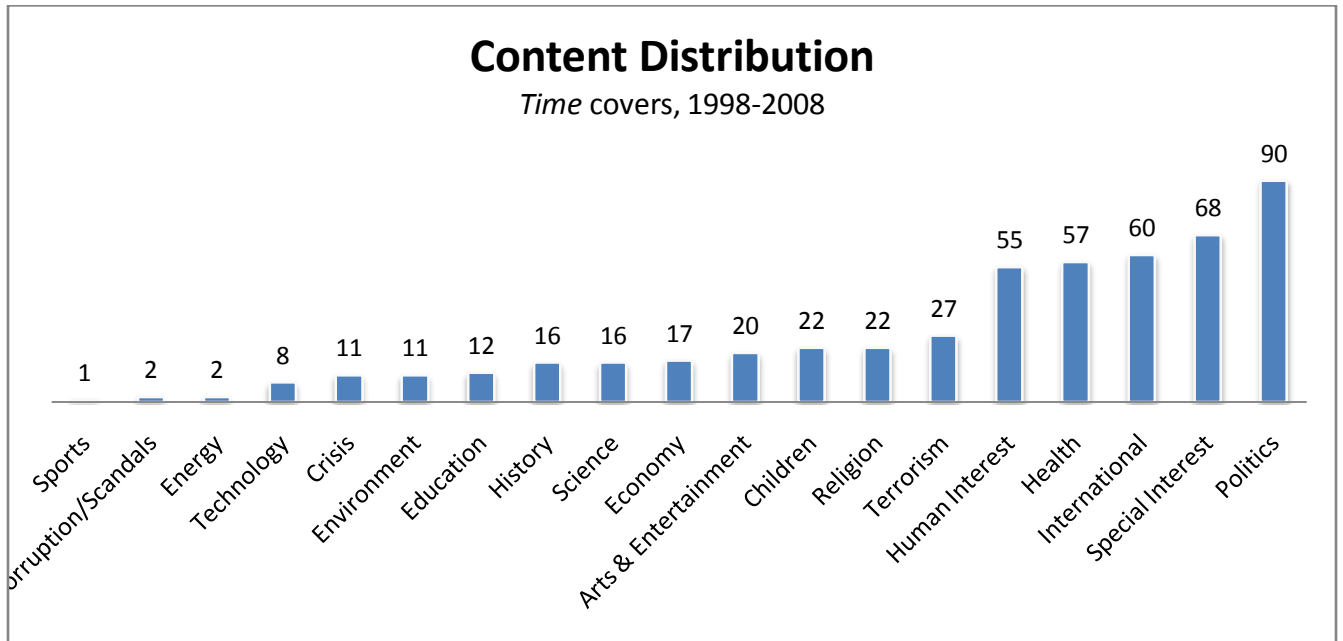
The primary motive for coding individuals was to analyze and interpret what individuals appeared on the cover and what groups of people were represented. Only contemporary individuals were coded. Contemporary individuals are defined as anyone living within the 50 years. Therefore, well-known individuals such as Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, Adolf Hitler, and Albert Einstein were not coded. Staged photographs or illustrations of people used to illustrate an event, change, or trend and who were not specifically affected by the occurrence were not coded while people who were specifically affected by an occurrence were coded. To clarify, consider the January 24, 2005 cover in which a photograph of a man in his twenties sitting in a sandbox appeared to convey the headline “They Just Won’t Grow Up,” an article about young adults who are not maturing. This individual was not coded since he was used as a generic illustration of a larger occurrence. However, two New Orleans, LA women trapped in flood water were coded in the September 12, 2005 cover image to illustrate an article about the wrath of Hurricane Katrina. Infants, silhouettes, and individuals whose race/sex was indistinguishable were not coded. Individuals appearing in a group larger than five were not coded unless one individual was clearly a central focal point. For example, President George Bush appears surrounded by rescue workers at Ground Zero on the September 24,

2001 cover but is so clearly the focal point of the cover that the rescue workers were not coded.

Individuals' nationality (domestic or international) were coded based upon what the average passerby would reasonably assume: for example, the January 10, 2006 cover featured a photograph of a distraught Asian woman in the wake of the December 2005 tsunami and was coded as international, given that the average passerby would reasonably assume the woman was not a U.S. citizen but a native of an affected state.

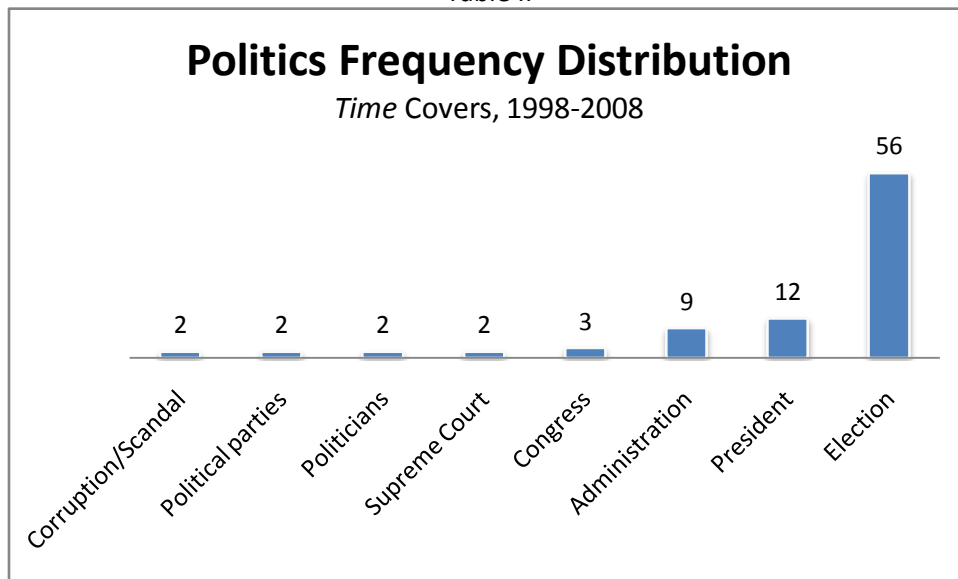
## Findings

Table I



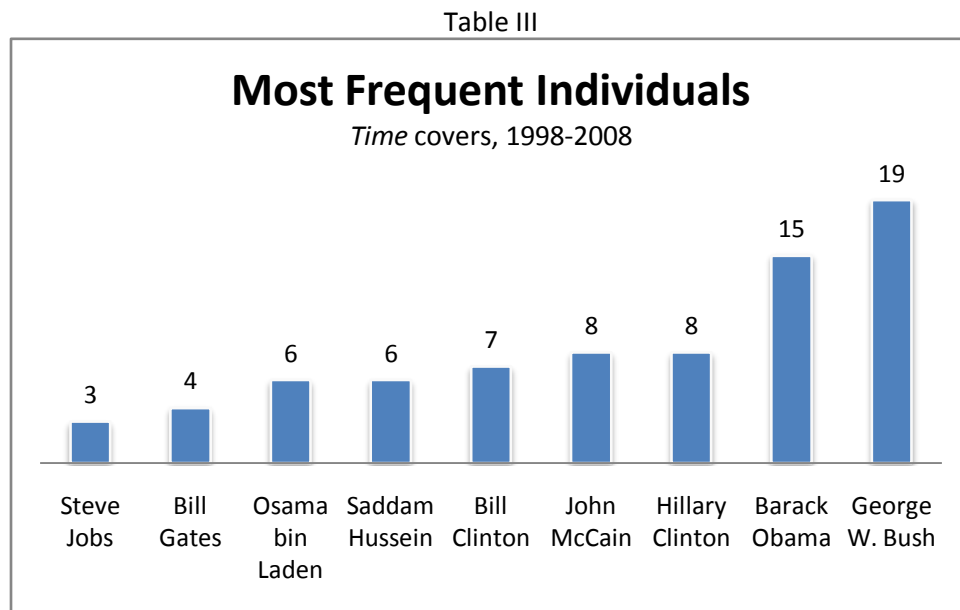
If frequency indicates what *Time* considers the most pressing issues of a decade, politics is certainly the number one priority. Out of 517 covers, articles about politics made 90 appearances: more than the ten least popular content genres combined.

Table II



More covers (56) were devoted to articles about presidential elections than any other news topic. 12 covers depicted the president and directly correlated to articles about policy or ideology. The third most-frequent political sub category were cover appearances by members of the president’s administration, strongly indicating that the executive branch is observed as the number one government newsmaker.

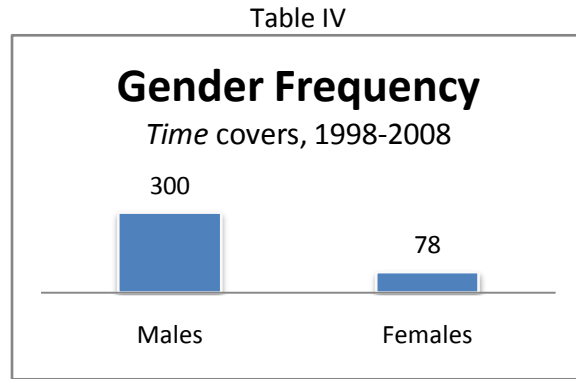
**Who Appears Most Frequently?**



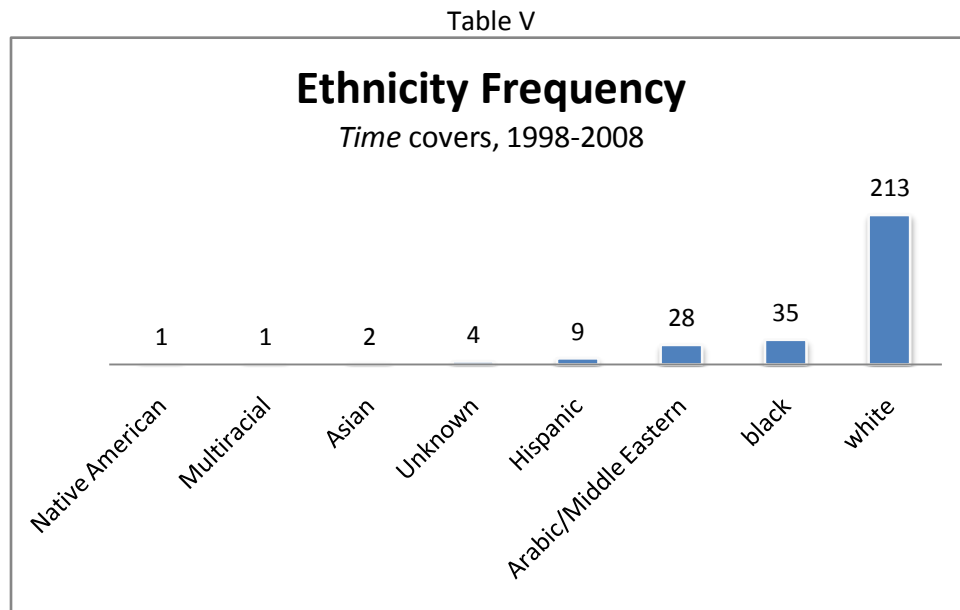
George W. Bush was part of the national spotlight during the entire range of the study, as a presidential candidate from 1998-2000 and president from 2001-2008. He is also the individual most frequently depicted, appearing on 19 covers. Current President-Elect Barack Obama is the second most frequent individual depicted, appearing exclusively or with fewer than four other people on 11 covers, and appearing on a total of 15 covers. Both 2008 presidential hopefuls and U.S. Senators John McCain and Hillary Clinton appear on eight covers while former President Bill Clinton appears on seven covers. Both 9/11 mastermind Osama Bin Laden and former Iraqi dictator Saddaam Hussein appear in six covers each. Microsoft founder Bill Gates appears as the eighth most frequent individual, appearing on four

covers, while Apple founder Steve Jobs appears as the ninth most frequent individual, appearing on three covers.

**Who Is Most Represented?**

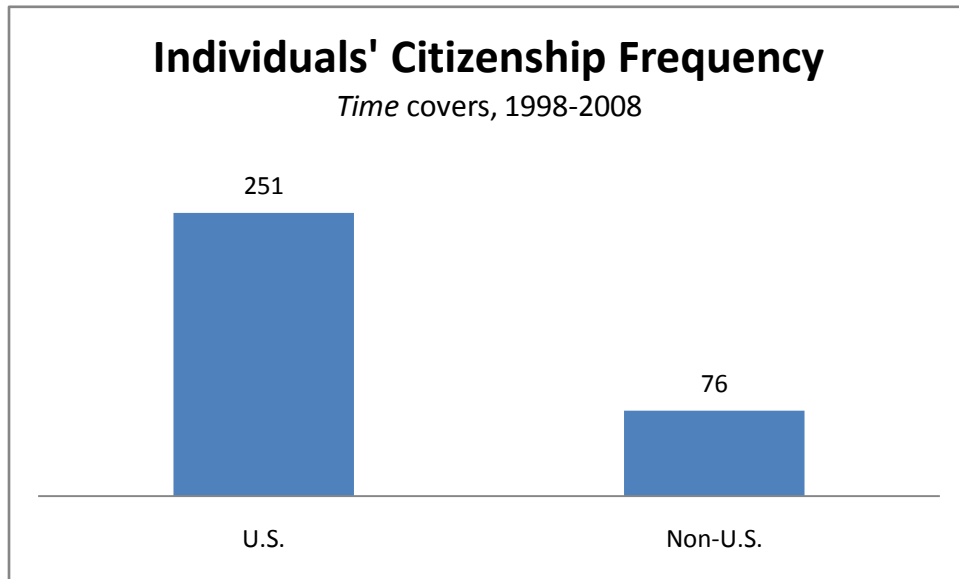


Males appear on 300 covers, while females appear on 78 covers. Note that some of these appearances occur simultaneously.



Whites are the overwhelming majority with 213 cover appearances – almost threefold of the number of cover appearances made by individuals of all other ethnic groups combined.

Table VI



U.S. citizens appear on 251 covers, while non-U.S. citizens appear on the cover 76 times. Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein make up 16 percent of these appearances. In addition to Hussein, other state leaders also appear on the cover including Kim Jong Il of North Korea, Nelson Mandela of South Africa, Yasser Arafat of Palestine, Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, Hu Jintao of China, and Vladimir Putin of Russia. In addition, foreign spiritual leaders including the Dalai Lama and Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI make cover appearances.

## Conclusions

*Time* covers reveal much about the media's agenda. Putting the magic bullet theory to practice, *Time* tells us not what to think, but what to think about. Politics reigned as the number one issue, while special interest, health, international, and human interest articles all maintained strong prominence during the last decade by appearing on the cover of the world's largest newsmagazine 55 or more times each. Using cover appearances as an indication of *Time's* agenda, the researcher is surprised to find that *Time* strives to be a newsmagazine first and feature magazine second. Informing, entertaining, and persuading the general public instead of a specific target audience is not the case. The modern *Times* reader uses the newsmagazine as a supplement to other mediums that deliver the news at an instantaneous level. *Time* is an old-world medium luring its audiences into its pages filled with slower-paced, after-the-facts articles. For many however, the cover is all we will see of the eighty-plus year old newsmagazine.

The political news events that graced the cover of *Time* so frequently illustrate the importance politics still maintains in our lives. Perhaps that is so because so much rests upon the men (and women) in office. The difference between war and peace, access to health care, varying perspectives on vast social issues such as abortion and civil rights, the health of the economy, and so much else have everything to do with elections and policy decisions. Political prominence on the cover of *Time* also disproves the notion that "politics constantly competes with entertainment," (Prior, 2005). Another significant conclusion is the emphasis on the executive branch of U.S. government. Although several considerable events occurred within the legislative branch – the deaths of longtime U.S. Senators Jesse Helms and Strom Thurmond, the resignation of Senate Majority/Minority Republican Leader Trent Lott, and the recent \$700 emergency bailout legislation are just a few momentous Congressional news events that did not appear on *Time's* cover.

To responsibly determine if *Time* sways too far left in the realm of political ideology, one must delve deeper than the front cover. However, it is important to note President Barack-Obama has appeared on the cover 15 times – only four less than President Bush. This is less likely an indication of *Time's* exalted support for Obama, but rather the media's obsession with a new kind of president. During the 2008 election, candidates received a more comparable amount of coverage (Barack Obama has gained 3 more appearances since the election, and several cover appearances featured both Senator John McCain and/or Senator Hillary Clinton, therefore offsetting the number of appearances Obama has.)

Examining 10 years of *Time* covers reveals another interesting layer of the mass media. Individuals who received the most cover appearances were U.S. Presidents, candidates for office, U.S. enemies, and the founders and leaders of the two largest software organizations in the world. From this portrayal, it is clear *Time* knows where news is going: a continuation of something old – politics, and the addition of something new – technology. Bill Gates and Steve Jobs are the two most distinguishable faces of technology and innovation and the researcher suspects they will continue to receive more cover appearances in the future.

Several hypotheses about demographics were confirmed through this study. The researcher believed whites and males would dominate the cover of the world's largest newsmagazine, and the research confirms this hypothesis. Although demographic figures would have certainly looked less diverse four decades ago, *Time's* most important people are still whites and males. African Americans trailed far behind whites, but ranked second most frequent. Nearly all individuals of Arabic/Middle Eastern ethnicity arrived on the cover with articles about terrorism, war/violence. Hispanics were the largest underrepresented individuals, accounting for only nine cover appearances in the last 10 years

(The August 22, 2005 cover featured 25 Hispanics for the article “The 25 Most Influential Hispanics In America,” but were not coded due to coding procedures.

One hypothesis was proved wrong. Prior to the study, the researcher believed *Time*, branding itself as a world newsmagazine, would incorporate more international figureheads to adapt to the modern realm of globalization. Although international stories appeared on the cover frequently, heads of state – symbols of other nations – were few and far between. The two most frequent non U.S. cover appearances were made by Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein – the two most wanted enemies of the U.S..

## Limitations

A few limitations prohibited the gathering of additional research. Due a desire to direct the research into narrow objectives, further analysis of *Time*'s covers was not conducted. What specifically were the top health or children concerns? How has the portrayal of the president changed since inauguration? Additionally, the researcher was prevented from gathering information about correlations between time and category.

## Future research

Future research into the exploration of newsmagazine covers would certainly reveal a sharper perspective on the pulse of modern “weekend” journalism. Examining the covers of *Newsweek* and *US News & World Report* would provide additional lenses into the most prominent events and individuals of the last ten years. Additionally, examining *Time* covers from another decade would provide enhanced knowledge of trends/changes within the publication.

## Works Cited

Prior, M. (2005). News vs. Entertainment: How Increasing Media Choice Widens Gaps in Political Knowledge and Turnout. *American Journal of Political Science*, 49 (3), 577.

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## Appendix