Media

How People covers AIDS says a lot about us

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Pop quiz: What major magazine has published more AIDS articles than Time and more than twice as many cover stories? What magazine has consistently treated People's response to AIDS as "one of the litmus tests of human decency?" And what magazine, even though it isn't a news or political journal, seized on Rock Hudson's demise way back in 1985 as an opportunity to: 1. Report that "something is wrong with the health care system... when a wealthy man and a friend of the President has to go to Europe for treatment" and 2. Suggest that "a cure could be 10 years off" but that "so disastrous a delay could be halved if enough money and brainpower were applied to the attack on AIDS?"

The answer is People. True, only a handful of People's 178 articles (versus 122 for Time) have as sharp a political edge as that first Rock Hudson cover story. (People's subsequent pieces on Hudson, for example, veer awfully close to hysteria about Rock's kiss with Linda Evans on Dynasty.) Still, virtually all of People's articles take the form of morality plays, where the compassionate are heroes and the closed minded are villains.

The sermon the magazine has kept preaching to its estimated 33 million readers was best expressed by Ryan White, the hemophiliac teenager with AIDS who was driven from his hometown by local bigots who tried, among other things, to torch his family's house. "Maybe I would have been afraid of AIDS too," People quoted White as saying, "but I wouldn't have been mean about it."

So how did middlebrow People, which practically invented celebrity journalism, come to be a leader in AIDS coverage? By a mixture of conscience and avarice.

The first Hudson cover turned out to be the magazine's best-selling issue of the year, according to Jedd Yarbrough, who cowrote the Hudson story and is now editor-in-chief of The Advocate, the national gay and lesbian newsmagazine. (Yarbrough's editor was another gay man, Scot Haller who later died from AIDS.) Because the Hudson issue sold so well, "there was never any resistance to taking AIDS to the cover," says Yarbrough, who left People in 1987. Indeed, later AIDS covers proved to be very popular with readers. Ryan White, for example, graced three of the magazine's 16 AIDS covers (only 7 AIDS covers for Time), and White inspired more mail than anyone else People has ever covered, outpacing even Oprah and Princess Di.

Landon Y. Jones Jr., People Weekly's managing editor since 1989, concurs that People's AIDS coverage received "feedback from the marketplace that was positive." But profit wasn't always the only motive. "We've done an awful lot of inside stories that we just felt we ought to do," he says. "I guess I'm proudest of our consistency," he adds. "We've never not been there."

True. But the magazine's presence often feels like a cameo appearance: brief, with lots of air kisses. The magaine resisted "serious reporting," Yarbrough says, and of course he's right. As a friend put it, the purpose of People is to make you feel comfortable while waiting to see the dentist.

But even taking People on its own terms, one senses a resistance to something else, a resistance to portraying People with AIDS as activists. The prototypical People PWA is valiant, lovable and, above all, tactful. People's code word is "dignified" and in the magazine's pages PWAs are constantly dropping with dignity -- but theyr'e rarely fighting with fury or desperation or any other "undignified" emotion. (The exception that proves the rule is People's 1990 profile of ACT UP founder Larry Kramer.)

This aggressively nonpolitical stance may, as Managing Editor Jones asserts, help the reader empathize with People with AIDS. But even more it makes readers pity all those poor dying AIDS victims. The sales are in the pity because the psychology of the emotion is this: You can't feel sorry for someone while looking up. You have to be on high looking down; you have to be above the object of your pity. People readers may not be as rich or famous as Rock Hudson or Arthur Ashe, but at least they don't have AIDS. In this way, readers get to feel superior to even the most popular American idols -- and who wouldn't pay $2.39 at the checkout counter for that thrill?

To keep its perch as Time-Warner's most profitable magazine, People makes other compromises, and the most egregious is its treatment of blacks and other People of color. With the exception of a multi-racial collage for a 1988 cover on "AIDS & the Single Woman," black People weren't deemed worthy of an AIDS cover until Magic Johnson in 1992 and Ashe's in 1993. And when African-Americans show up inside the magazine in an AIDS-related story, they are usually drug abusers or poverty-stricken lovers of drug abusers.

People's bean counters, Yarbrough recalls, tabulated sales of issues featuring covers with celebs such as Michael Jackson and Diana Ross; they found that "black People didn't sell magazines" as well as white People. "There's some truth in that," concedes Jones, who adds, "We tend to cover AIDS as a middle-class, white and celebrity disease."

Precisely by slighting People of color, People Weekly is fulfilling its own stated mission as a mirror of our country's culture and of AIDS. Indeed racism's impact on PWAs was recently made appallingly clear within another equally unlikely publication, The New England Journal of Medicine. The Journal published a study which compared blacks and whites of identical HIV disease stage, genders, ages and health insurance status. In other words, the researchers factored out everything but race. And what they found was that 63 percent of whites were on AZT compared to only 48% of blacks. Given AZT's questionable effectiveness, that might not be so bad. But the

pattern extended to every other AIDS treatment. For example, 82 percent of white patients were taking drugs to prevent the onslaught of PCP, the pneumonia that causes more AIDS deaths than any other opportunistic infection. By contrast, only 58 percent of blacks were taking such prophylaxis.

What was most surprising about the study was the reaction to it. “We were really astounded to see the racial differences that exist,” researcher Richard Chaisson of Johns Hopkins Medical School told New York Newsday. How could he or any American possibly be surprised? Because we are living in a culture, perfectly represented by People magazine, which averts its gaze from African-Americans and which literally values blacks less than whites. "After reviewing care for People with HIV disease,“ added Dr. Chaisson, ”I’m forced to conclude that there really is a racial difference in how physicians are treating People."

Well, stop the presses.

For relief from all this AIDS racism, read Sojourner, an occasional publication of black gay voices in the age of AIDS. Through art, fiction and reportage, Sojourner bears exquisite witness. Most of the works are harrowing, but several, like the poem on page 23, use hilarity to achieve a taut, high-wire balance. And virtually everything in Sojourner shines with a kind of risky, urgent honesty that makes the mass media seem, well, pale.

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