

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

Opening Shot



URBAN PERSPECTIVE FROM EAST 100TH STREET, NEW YORK, 1966. Looking at this photograph, one might get the idea that the story here is about the buildings that make up part of a street in one of Manhattan's poorest neighborhoods. But the real story is about the people who populate those buildings, their struggles, their triumphs, and the factors that determine how they live their lives. Over a hundred years ago, the photojournalist Jacob Riis went into a slum with his camera and emerged with *How the Other Half Lives*, a searing look at urban poverty that set the standard for all future reporters covering the same beat. Find a copy of the book and read it. What can you learn from Riis's groundbreaking reporting?

Talking Points

IN THIS ISSUE, CJR looks at several different ways poverty is covered in the United States and abroad. Our cover story on *The Wire*'s David Simon reveals fundamental differences between Simon and his former bosses at the Baltimore *Sun* about the best way to report on poverty. Also, veteran reporter E. J. Dionne sits down for a one-on-one interview about the beat, while a profile of *New Orleans Times-Picayune*'s Chris Rose finds that the former gossip columnist has developed a newfound empathy for his fellow Katrina survivors struggling with psychological problems. CJR also looks at the work of Indian journalist Palagummi Sainath, who might be called the Jacob Riis of India.

Simon, Dionne, and Sainath all report that covering poverty has some surprising challenges, not the least of which is the opposition of editors and publishers who think readers would prefer reading about the problems of the rich to those of the poor. Read through your local paper. Are issues related to poverty well covered? Do you think it's an important beat? If you were assigned to cover poverty, what kinds of stories would top your priority list?

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SECRETS OF THE CITY, PP. 22-31: What are the different philosophies of journalism that are the basis for at least part of the dispute between David Simon and his former editors? Compare and evaluate both points of view. Which side do you think is correct? Why? Which side do you think the author, Lawrence Lanahan, takes? Considering the comments of those interviewed in this story along with those of E. J. Dionne (p. 15), should stories about poverty get more space in newspapers? Why or why not? Why do you think they don't? Suggest some ideas for using the Web to focus creatively on poverty-related stories. **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Watch an episode of *The Wire*. What does the program reveal to you about covering issues related to urban poverty from the different points of view of editors, reporters, and publishers? Imagine you are the city editor of a local paper. Find a story in your town or city related to the issues

raised in the article. Write a pitch to your local paper, outlining the story and what it reveals in a larger sense about American society's relationship to the poor. To whom would you speak for your story and why?

THE REDEMPTION OF CHRIS ROSE, PP. 32-35: What is it about Chris Rose's emotional makeup that made him both a talented news reporter and vulnerable to the breakdown that he suffered? Would you have taken on the gossip columnist job that he accepted before the hurricane? Why or why not? The article points out the *Times-Picayune's* spotty journalistic record before Katrina. Would the post-Katrina problems have been as severe had the newspaper taken its role more seriously before the hurricane? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Go to the *Times-Picayune* Web site (www.nola.com). Find Chris Rose's post-Katrina columns. Read through a number of them. Chose two or three that you think are especially well done. Discuss your reactions to them, and break them down to explain why they are so effective. Imagine you are David Simon. Come up with what you think are two big post-Katrina stories for New Orleans. Outline how you—as Simon—would have covered them.

THE LANGUAGE OF STRANGERS, PP. 36-40: What are the different ways a community newspaper can make a real difference in the life

Between the Lines

- 1) How would you convince young people to value "news literacy"? Should courses on news literacy be made mandatory in schools?
- 2) Compare reports from reporters embedded with American and British troops. Whose are the more illuminating? Why? Based on the personal account of embedding with troops in Iraq on page 8, who do you think ultimately benefits more from the program: the military or the readers? Why?
- 3) Weigh both sides of the argument regarding checkbook journalism (p. 12). Imagine you are the head of a news company. Lay out what you think would be the best policy regarding the payment of sources. Explain your reasoning.
- 4) Should bloggers unionize? Why or why not? Could they do so successfully? Explain.
- 5) Why does Carlin Romano take issue with Robert McChesney's belief that "corporate domination of big media undermines democratic pluralism of ideas." Do you agree or disagree? Why?

of a small town? Would you want to be the editor or publisher of a community paper? Why or why not? What were the major mistakes made by Robert Plotkin? If you had been the new publisher, how would you have insured an easier transition for the readers? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Go online and read recent issues of the *Point Reyes Station*. Critique it. Does it serve the community well? How would you improve it?

UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTH, PP. 51-53: How and why are the attitudes among Indian English-language publishers about covering poverty similar to those of many of their American counterparts? Compare Palagummi Sainath's and David Simon's approaches to covering poverty. **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Find and read one of Sainath's articles. Compare his approach and technique to writing and reporting to that of American journalists. Whose work in America comes closest to Sainath's? Why? Go online and read some of the English-language newspapers that are mentioned in the article. Critique what you read in the context of the issues raised by the author. Compare their news coverage to that of a major American paper with which you are familiar.

MAY I SPEAK FREELY? PP. 46-51: Do you agree or disagree with Lewis's position (as explained by Neier) that reporters are not entitled to hold special privileges? Explain. According to the author, First Amendment protections for journalists have not been seriously threatened by the Bush Administration's "war on terror." Do you agree or

disagree? After reading of the ordeal suffered by the Hill family in the wake of *Time* magazine's story about them, would you have published the story had you been a *Time* editor? Why or why not? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Research the history of the major court decisions that have advanced press freedoms since 1789. Write an essay discussing the importance of the decisions you cite, but focus on the one decision that you feel was the most important in establishing the freedom that the press enjoys today. Explain the reasons for your choice.

Quick Takes

- 1) Is the media dominated by liberals? Survey the major media outlets and draw your own conclusions. Explain your reasoning.
- 2) Download a demo of *Global Conflicts: Palestine* and play it. What did you learn from your time with the game about covering the Middle East?
- 3) After reading the interview with E. J. Dionne (p. 15), suggest three local poverty stories. Explain their importance and how you would cover each of them.
- 4) After reading "What Would You Do?" (p. 41), come up with three "experiments" of your own, explaining how you would set them up and what each story might indicate.