

# COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

## Opening Shot



CLEVELAND'S LEBRON JAMES IS SURROUNDED BY THE PRESS. Although he's pushed against his locker by the media, do you think he's being asked tough questions? The Cavaliers' superstar refuses to do solo interviews with the local media. More and more teams and players are cutting out reporters and using their own blogs or networks to reach out to fans. What would you do as a reporter if you were assigned to cover a team, athlete, or celebrity who refused to cooperate? How would you get the story?

## Talking Points

IN THIS ISSUE, CJR does something that many newspapers won't — celebrate books. As Steve Wasserman, the former books editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, points out, more and more newspapers are ridding themselves of their book review sections and even their book reviewers. Wasserman knows what he is talking about. Despite editing one of the country's most respected book review sections, in 2005 he found himself out of a job due to cutbacks.

Two other articles discuss the connection between daily journalism and books. Veteran editor Elisabeth Sifton explores the importance and popularity of news books, while former *Washington Post* education reporter Linda Perlstein talks about the advantages a book author has over a daily newspaper reporter when trying to cover a story in depth.

Are newspapers hurting themselves by cutting back on their books coverage? Is encouraging readers to buy and think about books good for newspapers? How important do you think books coverage is for a newspaper and its readers?

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### PLAY (HARD) BALL, PP. 14-16:

Why do you think it's called "sports writing" and not "sports reporting"? Why do sports sections often feature the best writing in a newspaper? What might be the result if city-side reporters covered sports and vice versa? According to the story, more athletes and teams are cutting reporters out of the process of telling their stories. How might that be a disadvantage for athletes in the long run? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Read the sports section of one or two of your local newspapers over the course of a week. Evaluate the quality of the reporting. How much real journalism appeared in the section? How critical were the articles of the teams and players they covered? Read articles by two or three classic sportswriters, i.e. Red Smith, John Lardner, A.J. Liebling, Jim Murray, Grantland Rice, and Roger Angell among others. What made them so great? Select what you think are exemplary selections from their work and share them with the class.

### THE MARSHALL PLAN, PP. 22-27:

Go online and explore Talking Points Memo ([www.talkingpointsmemo.com](http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com)) over several days. Where do you think it excels? Where does it fall short? Is it deserving of the praise it receives from David Glenn? Why or why not? Discuss the value of TPM in terms of the issues raised by the editorial, "Letting Go," on page 4.

Could TPM be a model for future cooperation between newspapers? Does it represent the future of journalism? Why or why not? An editor is quoted in the story as saying that there is an “enormous cultural disconnect” between journalists and bloggers. Why do you think that is so? What can bloggers do that journalists can’t and vice versa? How can the gap be narrowed? Should it be? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Find more blogs or Web sites that do journalism. As a class, catalogue the best of them and distribute the list amongst yourselves. According to the story, Chris Cillizza’s *The Fix* offers a look at what *The Washington Post* may look like one day. Check out *The Fix* (<http://blog.washingtonpost.com/thefix/>). How does it differ from TPM? Compare and contrast its strengths and weaknesses to those of TPM. Do you see it as the *Post*’s future? The article also mentions *I. F. Stone’s Weekly*. Who was he? What motivated him? What were his strengths as a reporter? Why was his weekly so influential? What can a young reporter learn from Stone and his work?

#### Quick Takes

- 1) After reading “How Healthy is Men’s Health?” (p. 6), suggest a more suitable title for the magazine.
- 2) Go online and read sample issues of the British tabloids. Compare and contrast them to their American counterparts. Do you think anything should or could be done to rein them in? Explain.
- 3) Seek out a news book that interests you and review it in the context of some of the points about them raised by Elisabeth Sifton (p. 54).

### GOODBYE TO ALL THAT, PP. 42-53:

Do research to find out why the newspapers mentioned in the story eliminated their books coverage. Do you think their reasons were justified? If the sports section of the *Los Angeles Times* was — like its book review sections — ad-free, why weren’t the sports editors pressured into changing their coverage? Why does

#### Between the Lines

- 1) Read the letter by By Fred B. Walters (p. 6 bottom). Do you agree or disagree with his point of view about how a reporter should report and write a story assigned to him? Explain.
- 2) What could be the advantages of a career with a small daily newspaper as opposed to working for a much larger organization?
- 3) After reading “The Identity Trap” (p. 28), answer the question posed by the article’s subhead.
- 4) Would newspapers and their readers be better off if ownership followed the non-profit model (p. 32)? Explore arguments for both sides before deciding why or why not.
- 5) List the benefits and drawbacks of the government stepping in to help troubled press organizations (p. 37). Then decide what you would do if you owned a newspaper in financial difficulty and were presented with the possibility of government aid.

the author believe that books coverage is important to a newspaper and its readers? Do you agree or disagree? Why? What issues does the controversy raise about a newspaper’s obligations toward its readers? According to Wasserman, many of the book reviews that appear in newspapers are mediocre. What do you think are the elements that go into a quality review? Find an example of what you think is a well-written book review and share it with the class along with your reasons for choosing it. Do you agree with the statement on the bottom of page 47 that criticism is not necessarily a democratic activity? Why or why not? Read the statistics about America’s reading habits on page 52. Are they troubling? Why or why not? How can Americans be convinced to do more reading? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Imagine you are the arts editor of a mid-sized newspaper. You have asked your publisher to either retain or create a books section. You are granted permission on the grounds that you create a section that attracts and interests readers. Come up with a mock-up of your section, complete with sample interviews and prototypes for the types of articles that you would like to feature in your section. In an accompanying memorandum, explain how you envision your books section, the kinds of books you would review, and the coverage you would offer. Be sure to explain the decisions you’ve made.

### UNSHACKLED, PP. 57-60:

According to Linda Perlstein, sources are much more likely to talk to a book author than a newspaper reporter. If you were a reporter covering a beat, how would you go about trying to allay the concerns of your sources? The author lists several advantages that a book author has over a daily newspaper reporter. Suggest an equal number of advantages that a newspaper reporter has over a book author. In the end, who do you think ultimately has the upper hand? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Outline a proposal for a book based on a local news story. Explain why your idea is important, why it deserves book-length treatment, and how you would take it beyond a single newspaper story or series.