

# COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

## Opening Shot



RECRUITS IN THE WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION lay a sidewalk in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, in 1938. Search through newspaper and magazine archives to see how President Franklin D. Roosevelt's recovery plan was covered in the press. Compare it to coverage of President Obama's stimulus plan. Michael Massing writes in this issue of CJR about the venomous attacks against Obama on radio and television. Watch or listen to the programs that are mentioned, and then compare the allegations about President Obama to the extreme right's portrayals of FDR and his wife Eleanor. In both cases, what is at the root of the criticism? Do you consider broadcasters like Rush Limbaugh to be journalists, or are they simply entertainers? What do they say? If they are entertainers and not journalists, why are they taken so seriously?

### WHAT WE DIDN'T KNOW HAS HURT US, PP. 28-32:

Do you think the Bush administration hurt itself with its tendency toward secrecy? When, if ever, should government secrets remain secret? Is it wrong for journalists to probe policies that the government claims are necessary for national security? Did 9/11 and its aftermath place legitimate limits on what journalists can reveal? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Find out more about the Freedom of Information Act and how it can be of use to you as a journalist. Read the executive order regarding transparency issued by President Obama on his first day in office. How could his directive make a difference for you personally and professionally? Speak to journalists who have used the Freedom of Information Act in their work. Why did they file requests? Did they obtain the information they needed? If so, how were they able to do so? If they weren't able to obtain what they needed, have them explain what happened. Ultimately, how useful was the FOIA to them?

**HUNG OUT TO DRY, PP. 33-35:** Was the Bush administration right to claim that *The New York Times* and *The*

## Talking Points

IN THIS ISSUE, CJR present several stories on transparency in government. The transition from the Bush to the Obama administration has been marked by a dramatic change in the attitude toward transparency. Where President Bush and his aides promoted secrecy, President Obama, in contrast, issued an executive order on his first day in office, directing federal compliance with the goals of the Freedom of Information Act.

While the new president says transparency is vital to a working democracy, journalists must make sure that the curtains that had once been drawn around the federal government's operations are reopened and stay that way.

It's also up to journalists to find ways to make their readers care about this vital issue. As we report in this issue, one of the most discouraging aspects of the stories broken by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, about constitutional abuses by the Bush administration was that hardly anyone seemed upset.

Why was that? What can journalists do about it? Though newspapers are suffering, journalists and citizens, as Micah Sifry points out, have more tools at their disposal to view the inner workings of government. How can we use them more effectively and wisely?

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*Washington Post*, endangered national security with their stories on warrantless wiretapping and torture, respectively? If given a choice, would you have reported those stories if the administration had said that doing so would have disrupted the “war on terror”? Should the authors of those stories be prosecuted? Why do you think the American people didn’t appear to care about the revelations? If you had been an editor overseeing those stories, would there have been anything you could have done differently to make people care more about them? According to the story, many journalists were discouraged by the apathetic response to the stories. How would you have felt? If you knew you faced possible prosecution for a story like those at the *Times* and the *Post*, would you still want to work on it? How do you think the decline of newspapers has contributed to the climate of fear that has pervaded the country since 9/11?

**ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Explain in a memo how you would have investigated the Bush administration’s claim that the *Times* and the *Post* stories compromised the nation’s ability to fight terrorism. List the sources you would consult for your story. Have your congressman or a representative from his or her office take questions from the class on the issue of the Bush administration’s alleged violations of constitution. Find out where the congressman stands on these issues and on the possible prosecution of former Bush administration officials.

**WHAT WE LEARNED IN THE MELTDOWN, PP. 36-39:** How well have you kept up with the financial crisis? What have been your chief sources of

#### Between the Lines

- 1) If you were the managing editor of CleanSkies.tv (p. 10), how would you ensure that the network’s news programming would be objective regarding energy issues?
- 2) In an essay, interpret the implications of any of the figures in the “Hard Number” column.
- 3) Do you agree or disagree with Michael Massing’s suggestion on page 17 about the best way to address the extremist views being voiced on popular radio programs around the country?
- 4) Would you want to work for a newspaper owned by Rupert Murdoch? Why or why not?

information about it? Explain your choices. What do you think journalists should learn from the meltdown? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Imagine you were a reporter covering the financial sector. Explain in a memo what you think are the five most important stories for the coming year and how you would make them interesting for your readers. Find out what derivatives are. Write a story explaining them in a way that your readers will understand what derivatives are and appreciate their importance.

**A SEE-THROUGH SOCIETY, PP. 43-47:** Micah Sifry predicts a boost in awareness and activism as the Web becomes more sophisticated, but in a previous story, the author of “Hung Out to Dry” says that most Americans didn’t seem to care about revelations regarding the Bush administration’s “war on terror.” Is there a contradiction between the two stories? Can having so much

information available be counterproductive? The author also says that Twitter has become a useful tool for journalists. How would you put it to use as a reporter? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Go to the Web site of the Sunlight Foundation. Explain how you could localize two issues or stories highlighted on the site. Explore everyblock.com. If it covers your city, find a local listing from the site and report a story from it. If the site doesn’t cover your city, find out if similar information on your locality can be found on another site. If so, find a story from there and report it. Create a blueprint for a site like everyblock.com that would cover your town. Organize a class project to create and manage one. Study the “Apps for Democracy” submissions. Come up with one of your own.

**CONDITION CRITICAL, PP. 48-52:** What are David Hajdu’s major complaints about the latest trends in arts coverage? Do you share his concerns? Why or why not? Look at the arts coverage in your local newspaper. Is it an indication that Hajdu’s complaints are valid? Why or why not? What is your chief source of information about the arts? Why? Why do you think most newspapers are loathe to offer more intellectually engaging criticism?

**ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Break into groups of four. As a group, create an arts section for an imaginary daily newspaper in your community. Write the stories for a single arts section — covering music, television, movies, books, a museum exhibit, or gallery show — in the way you think the stories should be covered.

#### Quick Takes

- 1) You are the editor of a small daily newspaper. Your publisher suggests you print the mug shots of people in town who have been arrested. Explain in a memo why you do or don’t want to do it.
- 2) Read selections by the legendary sportswriters mentioned in the first paragraph of “Back to the Future.” Discuss their strengths and/or weakness in comparison to the work of the sportswriters in your newspaper. As a budding journalist, what can the work of the old timers teach you about writing and reporting?
- 3) Read samples of David Shankbone’s work, then have a friend or classmate sit for an interview. Write and edit it in Q & A form.
- 4) After reading “Digging In” (p. 53), list five food-beat stories that you think should be covered for your local newspaper. Explain how you would source each of them.