

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

With every issue, CJR produces a study guide for journalism students to delve into the areas we've covered, providing topics for classroom discussion and additional activities to test the ideas put forward.

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1. ON THE JOB (pp. 12–14): A *New York Times* correspondent relates the horrors of war in Gaza.

- a) The Gaza-born El-Khodary was one of the few journalists able to report from the scene of the fighting after Israel barred foreign journalists. Do you think her nationality influenced her perspective or strengthened her reporting?
- b) Do graphic details and photos help dramatize the story? Do they risk crossing into sensationalism?
- c) How do you think you would have covered this story if you were on the scene? Can you see yourself hearing explosions and running toward it, as El-Khodary did?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: d) Read this article alongside coverage of the Gaza conflict by El-Khodary and others on the *New York Times* site. Which do you find most compelling? Most informative? Do the *Times*'s articles on the political context add to your understanding, or distract from the on-the-ground realities of the bombings? **e)** Write an op-ed conveying your opinion of the conflict in Gaza. Which do you find more effective, stories of the effects on everyday people, or discussion of the geopolitics? How would you approach this if you were writing a news article instead?

2. POWER PROBLEM (pp. 24–30): An investigation of seven years of newspaper articles finds that the business press dropped the ball on covering the looming financial crisis.

- a) What do you think Starkman means when he writes that the business press suffered from Stockholm syndrome, which describes the sympathy that some hostages develop for their captors? Have you seen signs of this phenomenon in coverage of other topics?
- b) Do you agree with Starkman that “uncompromised regulation and great journalism go hand-in-hand”? What is the responsibility of the press to conduct oversight of business when the government fails to do so?

In This Issue



The global economic meltdown is exactly the kind of issue that shows the need for good journalism: a slowly emerging story requiring both factual investigation and thoughtful analysis. Did the press provide readers with enough warning of the financial bubble, or were reporters as blind to the facts as the financiers and regulators?

To help answer that question, *CJR* provides three perspectives on the state of business journalism today: Dean Starkman takes an in-depth look at financial coverage in the run-up to the stock market crash, and finds it wanting. Liza Featherstone examines the changing face of *The Wall Street Journal* in the wake of Rupert Murdoch's takeover. And Maureen Tkacik explores the uproar over CNBC's perceived cheerleading for the boom.

This issue also includes a pair of articles on another difficult topic: the war in Gaza, which prompted very different coverage depending on which outlet you read, and where. It's just one more reminder of the importance of accurate news coverage in helping readers and viewers to make sense of current events.

c) Did you follow the coverage before last year's economic crash? Did you feel you had sufficient warning that a collapse was possible? What sources gave you the best perspective on events as they were happening?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: d) Read The New York Times "Mortgaged Lives" report (3/15/2000) and the Los Angeles Times story "Workers Say Lender Ran 'Boiler Rooms'" (2/4/05). Why do you think there weren't more articles like these in the years before the meltdown? e) Using LexisNexis, search business coverage of a TV news outlet for part of the study period. How does it compare to Starkman's description of print media coverage? f) Could the press have helped to head off financial disaster if it had run the kinds of stories Starkman says it should have? Contact an economist and ask what he or she thinks would have happened if press coverage had been more critical from the start.

3. IDENTITY CRISIS (pp. 31–34): Murdoch's *Wall Street Journal* steers away from what made it great.

a) What do you think is gained, and what's lost, from the "more terse, scoop-oriented form of journalism" that Featherstone says the *Journal* is now pursuing?

b) Do you agree with Robert Thomson's contention that newspapers like the *Journal* have traditionally been "designed for journalists rather than for readers"? Do you think readers and journalists expect different things from coverage? Can newspapers ever meet both goals at once?

c) What do you read the most of each day: breaking news or in-depth reporting? Which would make you more likely to subscribe to the *Journal*?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: d) Read Tony Horwitz's "9 To Nowhere" article (available at tonyhorwitz.com). Could something like this be done in a shorter format? How would you cover this story for, say, a blog? e) Read "Doing the Math to Find the Good Jobs" (available at online.wsj.com). If you were a *Journal* editor, how would you improve it?

4. A MATTER OF TRUST (pp. 40–43): Israeli army abuses in Gaza prompted different coverage in different nations.

a) Which of the news stories presented by Goldberg do you think provide a more accurate portrayal of the war in Gaza, those in the British press or those in the U.S. press? Should newspapers strive for a balanced synthesis of the two approaches, or are readers best served by seeing both perspectives side-by-side?

b) Is it surprising to learn that most foreign correspondents in Israel don't read Hebrew? Should literacy in the local language be required of foreign correspondents, or can someone with good journalistic skills overcome that with the use of local translators?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) Read Ethan Bronner's New York Times story, "Soldiers' Accounts of Gaza Killings Raise Furor in Israel" (3/19/2009). Does the background of Israeli soldiers' experiences in the 2006 Lebanon war seem like useful context for understanding the situation, or a pretext to explain away the soldiers' actions? d) Read several sources' coverage of the same recent event in Gaza, and use them to write a composite article that tries to remain even-handed. Can you remain fair to both the "prosecution" and the "defense"?

Quick Takes

Read these short articles in class and discuss:

1) **Learning Curve (pp. 15–16):** Write a 600-word news story on an auto accident, real or fictitious, noting the details that Vanderbilt recommends: the weather, the speed limit, seatbelt use, and so on. How does that change the story? Can you do this and still be sensitive to victims' families?

2) **New Media (pp. 17–19):** Is investigative reporting an inherently liberal pursuit? Brainstorm story ideas to pitch to a conservative news outlet.

3) **Waiting for CNBC (pp. 35–39):** Is it reasonable for critics of CNBC to demand that the network devote itself to "responsible journalism that holds Wall Street accountable"? Jim Cramer said of his reporting during his appearance on *The Daily Show*, "I'm not Edward R. Murrow. I'm a guy trying to do an entertainment show about business." What do you think of this defense?

4) **A Vision in the Desert (pp. 44–47):** What do you think of Newland's argument that *The National* needs to "go at the country's cultural pace"? Is hard-hitting, no-holds-barred journalism an inherently "Western" type of journalism?