

# COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

## Opening Shot



**FAMILY MEMBERS ARE CONSOLED** outside Agriprocessors, a kosher meat plant in Postville, Iowa, after immigration authorities staged a major raid in early May. An article about the working conditions at the plant prompted the raid, but the government was only interested in arresting the company's undocumented workers, not addressing the hardships they were forced to endure on the job. What can you do as a journalist to promote public awareness about complex stories, such as immigration, in a time when news holes and attention spans are shrinking? Can readers be made to understand and care about these issues? If you were assigned to cover the raid on the Agriprocessors plant, how would you do it?

## Talking Points

IN THIS ISSUE, CJR looks at modern consumer reporting, which is a far cry from the days when Ralph Nader's "Unsafe at Any Speed," made him one of the most admired men in America.

Nowadays, the focus of consumer reporting is no longer on laws that may or not benefit the consumer but rather on consumerism. Newspapers like those in the *Tribune* chain are following suit, designing their news pages with a heavy emphasis on product information. Lee Abrams, the chain's "chief innovation officer," even wants to turn reporters into products to be marketed as stars to the reading public.

In the midst of our current financial crisis, is this new journalistic direction misplaced? Is there a connection between a ill-informed public and the current financial crisis? And is there a connection between shrinking newsholes and shrinking circulations as well? In his harrowing critique of the business press's coverage of the credit crisis, Dean Starkman suggests that many journalists on the beat may have missed one of the biggest stories of our young century. If he's correct, how do you think it happened? What can be done to keep reporters and readers on top of a story that affects us all?

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**THE LEE ABRAMS EXPERIENCE, PP. 26-31:** How does the author almost encourage the reader to prejudge Abrams before stripping away the surface of Abrams's character to reveal a more complex person? Why is that technique effective when writing a profile? What are the different facets of Abrams's personality and his views about journalism? Is he ultimately an appealing figure? Why or why not? What do you think of Abrams's earlier efforts at programming rock radio stations? How do you think it helped color his attitude toward newspapers? If implemented, will his ideas return his newspapers to profitability? Why or why not? Would you like to work at a newspaper that has undergone an Abrams makeover? The story makes a comparison between Abrams and Steve Jobs. In what ways are they alike? How are they dissimilar?

**ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Since the article was published, the new *Chicago Tribune* has been launched. Find a copy of the new *Tribune* and the *Orlando Sentinel*. Critique them in light of Abrams's ideas.

If possible, obtain older copies of both newspapers to compare with their remodeled versions. Imagine you were put in charge of a struggling newspaper. Write a memo on how you would make it profitable.

**IN THE BEGINNING, PP. 34-37:** How does the decline of the consumer movement coincide with the decline of newspapers? Why do you think there has been a decline both in print and on TV in coverage of “the nitty-gritty” of consumer legislation? How is the rise of consumerism connected to the explosion in popularity of the Internet? How do the ideas of someone such as Lee Abrams help feed consumerism at the expense of the consumer movement? How can the rise in consumerism backfire against consumers? For example, in the case of the current financial crisis, has it backfired? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Imagine you have been given the consumer beat on your newspaper, and your editor wants you to cover the beat within the confines of new economic realities of your paper. Write a memo to your editor explaining how you intend to cover your beat, suggesting ten possible stories to write. In your memo, explain how you intend to make your stories interesting and vital to your readers.

**THE PLOUGHMAN AND THE PROFESSOR, PP. 38-41:** Discuss the term “disintermediation” and its implications for journalists and journalism in general. Would you be more likely to trust the opinion of a journalist expert or a

citizen reviewer before making a purchase?

Does having a job with a newspaper or a Web site make that person’s opinions more trustworthy than those of someone who is simply familiar with a product, a group of products, or a specific subject area of expertise? What do you think is the best way to gauge a reviewer’s expertise?

**ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Note the potential story ideas that Cornog poses in the right column atop page 41. Select any one of those story ideas or think up one yourself and write the story, localizing it. As a class, create a guide to online consumer guides in a variety of categories. Rate the sites in regard to their usefulness, accuracy, and ease of use. Create a Web site from your guide or distribute it as a pdf.

**BOILER ROOM, PP. 48-53:** What do you think are the major reasons why, as the subhead says, “the business press is missing the crooked heart of the credit crisis”? Is there a connection between what Starkman says is a paucity of solid reporting on the crisis and the current financial squeeze facing many of the country’s leading newspapers? If so, what could it be? Might there be a connection between an ill-informed electorate and financial problems facing newspapers and the country in general? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Take the quiz on page 50. Did you get any of the answers correct? If not, or if you only got a small percentage correct, what can you do to stay better informed? Read a sampling of business journalists online and in

the nation’s largest newspapers. Who do you think has the best handle on the current crisis? Why? Read the transcript of the “This American Life” documentary cited on page 52. What lessons can you learn from the way it reports and relates the story of the crisis? In the penultimate paragraph, Starkman suggests what the real story behind the crisis is. If you were assigned that story, how would you report and write it?

#### Between the Lines

- 1) After reading “Louts Out” (p. 10), what do you think would be the best policy for handling what some people might perceive as offensive posts?
- 2) Find the full text of *The New York Times*’s policy on anonymous sources (p. 11). What is the importance of establishing such a policy? What would be your policy if you were asked to create one at your newspaper?
- 3) Read the Baltimore *Sun* series that is the subject of this issue’s Darts & Laurels column. Do you agree or disagree with Lawrence Lanahan’s comments? Explain.
- 4) After reading David Gates’s discussion of Hunter Thompson’s life and work, do you think journalism can stray from the facts and still have credibility? Why or why not?
- 5) Imagine a conversation between Lee Abrams, Jacob Riis, and Hunter Thompson. What do you think they would say about each other’s work?
- 6) What is your answer to the question posed by Ann Cooper (p. 45): What constitutes journalism?

#### Quick Takes

- 1) After reading “Blind Spot” (p. 14), find an embed’s account of the war that you think accurately describes what is really going on in the country. Explain your reasoning.
- 2) Take a spin as a sketch writer (p. 17) by watching a Congressional session on C-Span and writing up an account of the speeches or debates.
- 3) Rebecca Spitz’s accident (p. 19) points out just one of the dangers of being a journalist. Talk to several reporters about the dangers they face on the job and write a story about it.
- 4) Look at a selection of alternative weeklies online. Critique and compare them. Rank them from best to worst, explaining your reasoning.
- 5) Select a memoir of war reporting from any American conflict. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the writing and reporting, while also taking into consideration the challenges faced by the reporter in doing his/her job.