

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

Opening Shot



BASEBALL IS BACK after a winter of discontent that saw sportswriting move from the back pages of the nation's newspapers to the front. Professional baseball players didn't just start taking steroids these past few years, but when players began showing up in spring training bulked up to the point where some of them looked like cartoonish versions of their former selves, it was mostly treated as a joke. Why did sports writers miss such an important story? Sports writers are typically assigned to cover a team throughout a season. How might that system make sports writers reluctant to cover the seamier side of sports? Is there a difference between sports writing and sports journalism? Should there be?

Talking Points

IN THIS ISSUE, CJR reports on several major stories that were mishandled by the press. These include baseball's steroid scandal, the growing personal debt crisis prompted by abuses in the credit card industry, and the question over whether Iran was building a nuclear weapons program.

What happened? How and why did the press — to put it bluntly — blow these stories? If the stories about Iran are any indication, there seemed to be a fear among editors of reporting news that might be at variance with popular opinion (sound familiar?). How can you as a reporter or editor make sure that important stories are reported and gotten right? Can it be sure it will be done in newspapers or on television, or will we have to rely on the Internet to — to borrow the phrase — “think different”?

As several stories in this issue point out, the World Wide Web continues to soar in popularity, and with so many bloggers steering an independent course, and new specialized journalism sites such as The Politico and ProPublica, will the Internet soon be our primary source of not only breaking news but also the kind of analysis and in-depth reporting that is so vital to our democracy?

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LOST OVER IRAN, PP. 26-33: Why do you think the press failed for the most part to question the Bush Administration's allegations that Iran was intent on building a nuclear weapons program? Why was there so little interest in the “Grand Bargain”? Read the comment about the editors' actions on top of page 29. Why were they not just doubtful about the story but hostile to it? Would US-Iranian relations have taken a different course had the “Grand Bargain” been more widely reported? Read Nicholas Kristof's comments in the middle of page 29. If he is correct, why is that so? What, if anything, can be done to reverse the trend? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Research and list alternative sources of news that you think would be more likely to print the truth about Iran and other controversial stories. Explain your choices.

BLOGGING THE LONG WAR, PP. 36-40: What are some lessons from Bill Roggio's experience in choosing and reporting on his topics and putting up his site? What valuable information do people like Roggio supply that generally cannot be found in the mainstream press? Should newspapers provide the kind of

information that can be found on the sites of Bill Roggio and other military bloggers? Why or why not? Roggio says his site is non-partisan. Paul McLeary calls it “pro-soldier.” Does that make it partisan by definition? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Read through Roggio’s site as well the others mentioned on page 36. Critique each one. What do they do well? Where are they lacking? How well written and reported is their work? Find out more about the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (p. 39). How do you think Roggio’s relationship with that group affects the credibility of his site?

OUT OF FOCUS, PP. 41-44, RECOVERING REALITY, PP. 53-55:

What can a good documentary do that a newspaper or magazine article can’t? On the other hand, what are some of the inherent weaknesses in the form? If you had an important in-depth story to report, would you prefer to see it done as a documentary, an article, or book? Explain. Where do you think Michael Massing and Errol Morris would agree, and where do you think they would disagree about what makes a good documentary film? Compare the ways both think a documentary should be reported. Why does Morris not believe in “balanced journalism”? Do you agree or disagree? Why? What are the benefits and drawbacks of not using a narrator for a documentary? If you were producing a documentary, would you use a narrator? Why or why not?

Quick Takes

1) “Red Ink Rising” discusses how the media missed the story of how so many Americans have become mired in credit card debt. Find people struggling with debts and write a story about them, placing their problems in their proper context.

2) After reading “Immigration’s Rise” (p. 19), go out and find a local immigration story. Write it, keeping in mind the points raised by Dianne Solis.

3) Read “Happy All the Time.” Then, with a partner and a video camera, write and report what you think is a good story on an issue relating to the economy from the perspective of the “average Joe.”

Between the Lines

1) Both “A Question of Velocity” (p. 4) and “Crowd Control” (p. 55) discuss the importance of “hits” and “eyeballs” over the quality of the work itself. Why do you think that is so?

2) According to the letter entitled “Build a Guild,” Italy licenses its journalists. Is that a good idea? Why or why not?

3) Look at the first two entries in “Hard Numbers” (p. 11). Why do you think that age bracket’s trust in the media has declined?

4) Would you take a job with *The Jordan Times* if you had to deal with the same problems faced by Kristen Gillespie Demilio (p. 17)? Why or why not?

5) Look at the charts on pages 34 and 35. If you were a reporter for one of Zell’s newspapers, would you have voted to accept his offer? Why or why not? How will having a financial stake in the company’s future affect the way the reporters do their jobs?

6) Michael Schudson and Danielle Haas (p. 63) say that in the US, journalism continues to be defined by men. How would it be different if it was defined by women?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES: Get a copy of *The Thin Blue Line*, one of Frederic Weisman’s documentaries, and *Darwin’s Nightmare* (or another of the films discussed by Massing). Critique and compare them in a review while keeping in mind the ideas raised in both articles.

CROWD CONTROL, PP. 55-57: How has your life become different as a result of the Internet and the World Wide Web? Is it better or worse? List the ways the Web can make your work as a journalist easier and harder. As a journalist, are you better or worse-off with the Web?

What skills that were required of journalists before the Internet are not as necessary today? How do Clay Shirky and Lee Siegel differ in their feelings about the Web? With whom do you agree? Why? What does Shirky mean by “more is different”? Is it? If so, what are its implications for the media in the future? Would we be better off with a “publish then filter model” that Shirky discusses? Why or why not? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** This teaching guide suggests several stories to cover. Write and report on one of them without using the Internet (and, if possible, write it on a typewriter). Keep a diary of your efforts and how your work is proceeding differently from the way it would with Internet access. When you are done with your story, discuss how your writing and reporting might have been different with the Web.

SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL? PP. 61-62: According to Tom Goldstein, Jeffrey Scheuer believes the profit motives “provides a bias against excellence” in journalism. Why does Goldstein disagree with Scheuer? Who do you think is correct? Why? Goldstein adds that Scheuer doesn’t explain “who will pay for journalism if private enterprise is

eliminated.” Can you think of a way to do it while also guaranteeing a free press? Comment on Scheuer’s suggestions for improving journalism and journalism schools. Despite Goldstein’s criticism, do you think Scheuer’s ideas have validity? Why or why not? What improvements would you suggest to your journalism program?