

# 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. THE CONSTANT GARDENER (pp. 24–29):** A former editor for AOL's Patch reports how the hyperlocal news organization's mission is changing fast.

- a) How would you go about crafting a news site to appeal to a potential audience of just 21,000 readers? Is that a viable size to support a full-time staffer plus a collection of freelancers?
- b) Are there any good arguments for sometimes lowering the wall between editorial and advertising? Especially at a small newspaper or website, can an editor ever be entirely unaware of how decisions about coverage affect potential ad sales?
- c) Can the desire to drive web traffic numbers distort editorial priorities as much as the desire to sell ads? Are hit stats a reasonable measure of the success of a site, or do they need to be tempered by other goals?
- d) Discuss with your class: Is it viable to run a local news outlet under central corporate control? Is it too easy for top-down management structure to undermine local editors' expertise and knowledge of their communities? What solutions would you propose for this, if you were either a local site editor or a corporate manager?

**BEYOND THE CLASSROOM:** e) Identify local news websites in your town or neighborhood, and read their coverage. Do you think they do a good job of covering the issues you want to see covered? What would you do differently if given free rein over one of these sites? f) Read CJR's recent series about local news coverage in Modesto, California ([bit.ly/what-about-modesto](http://bit.ly/what-about-modesto)). What does this tell you about the challenges facing Patch and other local startups?

**2. MONEY TALKS (pp. 30–34):** Should financial journalists ever accept paid speaking gigs from the companies that they cover?

- a) What are the ways that journalists risk being influenced by paid speaking engagements? Is the money the main concern, or does the mere fact of speaking before groups that can afford to pay and not those that can't make a difference in what feedback a writer receives? Which writers get chosen to speak before paid audiences, and which don't?

## In This Issue



So-called “hyperlocal” journalism, focusing on one small town or neighborhood, is the latest craze among media titans. In this issue of *CJR*, former Patch editor Sean Roach reports on his experience running a site for the AOL-owned website chain—and how he discovered that small-town reporting doesn't necessarily mesh well with corporate management.

Next up, Paul Starobin investigates the growing trend of well-known Wall Street journalists taking on high-priced speaking engagements, sometimes from the very people they cover. Dimiter Kenarov looks at how freedom of the press has been muzzled in ostensibly democratic Belarus. And former *Cleveland Plain Dealer* reporter and columnist Connie Schultz describes how to relate to sources and readers, whether covering stories of injustice or writing about your own kids.

- b) As a class, debate Michael Lewis' insistence that speaking before a paying audience helps him hone his material, and often provides him with valuable material. What are the main arguments for and against this line of reasoning?
- c) Is requiring journalists to disclose their paid speaking assignments an acceptable solution? What do you think reader response would be to a writer disclosing that they'd been paid to speak to a group they report on? What was your response to Starobin's own disclosure that he occasionally gives paid speeches to nonprofits? Does it change your perception of him or his article?

**BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: d)** Read Erik Wemple's Washington Post blog item about Joe Nocera's speech before a Miami financial conference last October. Do you think the New York Times' explanation for allowing Nocera's talk is sufficient? Can some journalists' integrity and reputation be strong enough to make them incorruptible? If so, who do you trust to make that determination?

**3. TONGUE OPPRESSOR (pp. 40–43):** Censorship of the press comes in many forms in Alexander Lukashenko's Belarus.

- a) Discuss with your classmates: What do you think of Dimiter Kenarov's decision not to seek state-sanctioned accreditation? What is the best way to approach seeking credentials in a situation where they are likely to be denied?
- b) What forms of censorship exist in addition to outright prior restrictions on publication? Which are more widespread? Which more effective?

**BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c)** Research how journalists in the rest of the world are attempting to support their colleagues in Belarus. If international pressure succeeded in pressuring Lukashenko into allowing opposition newspapers to be sold and distributed through state networks, does that imply that international pressure can be successful? Are there any lessons that can be drawn from the global response to restrictions on the press in, say, Egypt?

**4. ONLY CONNECT (pp. 44–47):** Award-winning Cleveland journalist Connie Schultz reveals her secrets to winning over sources—and readers.

- a) Do you agree with Schultz that an inexperienced reporter is more likely to go for a “knock-'em-dead, blowout quote” without thinking about context? How can young journalists best learn how to consider when a quote or piece of information is important and when it's just sensational?
- b) Discuss Schultz's contention that major newspaper reporting has “become more and more the privileged covering the privileged. How were and are your own career possibilities constrained by your economic class?
- c) Should there be space for reporters to express more of their own opinions in news stories? Or was it right for Schultz to become a columnist once her knowledge of issues like unjust convictions made it too hard for her to hold back her opinions on the matter? What are the strengths and drawbacks of this requirement?

**BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: d)** Make a list of five of your own biases and how they could interfere with your journalism. What can you do to ensure that they don't overly influence your work? **e)** Research and report a story that requires interviewing people from a different race or class background from your own. Consider what methods you will use to win sources' trust. What do you find to be the most difficult aspects of reporting this story? Do they surprise you?

## Quick Takes

Read these short articles in class and discuss:

- 1) Show Us the Money (p. 4):** Do you think that TV stations' objections to putting campaign advertising data online are legitimate, or just a cover for not wanting to share their ad rates? Should any of this matter to the FCC? What uses could you think of for that information if it were widely accessible?
- 2) Murdoch Finds It's Not Easy Being Green (p. 15):** Is it hypocritical for Rupert Murdoch's media properties to challenge the legitimacy of global climate change when even Murdoch himself has accepted its validity? When, if ever, should a media outlet be expected to live up to the views of its owner?
- 3) Detained in Dagestan (pp. 16–18):** Did you learn anything useful from Judith Matloff's story that could help you in your own eventual reporting? Or does the best way to get out of detention remain getting detained in the first place?
- 4) Newt and the Age Gap (pp. 18–20):** Do you agree that the generation gap is the reason why reporters underestimated Newt Gingrich's chances? Or are there other factors at work, such as his unexpected funding windfall from Sheldon Adelson? If older people vote more in primaries, should that be taken into account in coverage, or should the opinions of all potential general election voters be seen as equally newsworthy? How would you approach reporting on candidates' appeal to voters who are unlike you in age, race, class, or gender?