

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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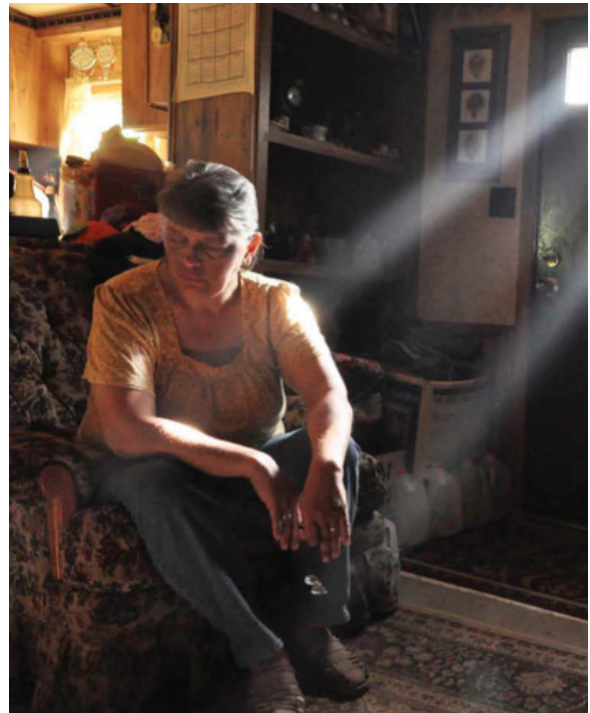
1. 'SURVIVAL OF THE WRONGEST' (pp. 16–21):

Personal-health coverage too often misleads readers with bad science and insufficiently thorough reporting.

- a) Discuss with your classmates their own experiences with dieting and nutrition. Have they learned anything from their own attempts? If so, what strategies have been successful? What does this indicate about what's commonly reported in the media about diets?
- b) Why might Tara Parker-Pope of *The New York Times* have misrepresented the science around dieting? What do you think would encourage reporters like her to more carefully check her facts?
- c) Do you agree that “the problem is not, as many would reflexively assume, the sloppiness of poorly trained science writers looking for sensational headlines, and ignoring scientific evidence in the process”? Does the fact that “celebrated health-science journalists” are writing bad articles indicate that this isn't just a case of sloppy journalism?
- d) Is it journalists' job to make people confident in weight-loss plans, if studies show that confidence is a main factor in weight loss being successful?
- e) Do science journalists too often treat all studies as equally valid? What strategies would you use to try to evaluate whether a particular study's claim is backed up by scientific consensus?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: f) Read Tara Parker-Pope's “The Fat Trap” from the *New York Times Magazine*

In This Issue



Science journalism is vitally important to our understanding of the world around us, whether it's about personal nutrition, public health, or our global climate. Yet all too often, news coverage falls short in separating science fact from science fiction.

In this issue of *CJR*, David H. Freedman explores the world of personal-health journalism, and how reporters can be too credulous of individual studies, without checking to see if they match with the scientific consensus. Fred Schruers profiles Cara Santa Maria, host of the Huffington Post science video series “Talk Nerdy To Me,” which attempts to make science accessible. Helena Bottemiller looks at the challenges that food safety presents to journalists, even as tainted food sickens one in six Americans every year. And Curtis Brainard interviews Neil deGrasse Tyson, the popular PBS science host who is helping remake Carl Sagan's series *Cosmos*.

Also in this issue, journalists in Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Turkey, Mexico, and North Korea recount the troubles of reporting from those troubled regions.

(bit.ly/nyt-fat-trap). Does it actually support the belief that obesity is genetically determined? What evidence does it provide for this? If you were Parker-Pope's editor, what questions would you have asked her if she'd submitted this article to you? **g)** David H. Freedman writes: "What's more, it is increasingly clear that the diseases that today wreak the most havoc—heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and Alzheimer's—are most effectively dealt with not through medical treatment, but through personal lifestyle choices, such as diet, exercise, and smoking habits." What's the evidence for or against this conclusion? Is it fair to sum up such things as diet and exercise as "personal choices," given the societal and marketing pressures surrounding these activities? Write a 700-word op-ed expressing your opinion.

2. SAFE AT THE PLATE? (pp. 25–27): Food safety remains a poorly covered story, even as it affects millions of Americans each year.

- a) Are you surprised by the CDC figures around tainted food—that one in six Americans is sickened each year, 128,000 hospitalized, and 3,000 die? Should this be receiving greater coverage in the news media? What are some factors that could be stopping news outlets from doing so?
- b) Is it difficult for journalists to report on illness outbreaks when the causes remain unidentified for some time? How would you approach reporting on a story when the scientific explanation has yet to be pinned down?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) Use Nexis or Google to research food safety stories that have appeared in the national or local media in recent weeks. What gets covered, and in how much depth? Compare the performance of the outlets listed in Helena Bottemiller's article as having a dedicated food safety reporter with those that don't; do the dedicated journalists do a better job?

3. BORDER CROSSING (pp. 37–49): Reporting in contested territories can leave journalists in danger of imprisonment, or worse.

- a) Why might the Pakistani government be uninterested in protecting tribal journalists or providing them with insurance? If information from this part of the world is so key to US foreign interests, should the US government—or US readers—be doing more to support quality journalism there? Is there anything they can do?
- b) Simon Akam writes of the Sierra Leone media: "When I wrote about government corruption, they ran bizarre ad hominem attacks on me." What could be some reasons for this? Is there any way to avoid it? Should US reporters care what local media outlets say about them? Why or why not?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) Visit the Committee to Protect Journalists website (cpj.org) and search for recent reports on Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Turkey, Mexico, and North Korea. How do they compare to other nations in terms of danger for journalists working there? Are there common reasons why some nations are more hostile to open reporting than others? What does this suggest for how best to defend journalists' ability to do their work in these important regions?

Quick Takes

Read these short articles in class and discuss:

- 1) **Darts & Laurels 2012 (pp. 14–15):** Which of these journalistic low points of the past year do you consider the most egregious? Which of the kudos handed out was most deserved? Discuss with your classmates how you came to make your choices. How effective do you think praise and criticism in the pages of CJR is at dissuading news outlets from avoiding the worst violations of good journalism, and encouraging them to excel? Is the existence of websites like Deadspin that critique the coverage of their competitors helping to keep the media more honest, or just informing readers which outlets are to be trusted?
- 2) **Chemical Reaction (pp. 22–24):** Do you think that Cara Santa Maria's presentation of science as playful and sexy is demeaning to the subject (and to herself), or a way to help popularize an often offputting subject? What's the dividing line between making a topic accessible and trivializing it?
- 3) **You've got shale! (pp. 28–29):** What do you take away from Brian Cohen's photograph of Janet McIntyre that you couldn't get from reading the accompanying article? In general, how important are visual images to your understanding of important topics? Can they be misleading as well as enlightening?
- 4) **Snow Job? (pp. 34–36):** Is there any way for TV stations to ignore the revenue available from campaign spending? Does it necessarily affect news coverage, or just swamp it with conflicting messages? How should stations respond to deceptive or inaccurate ads? Is it their moral or legal responsibility to?