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.*

To get CJR *into your students' hands through low-cost subscriptions, check out the options at http://www.cjr.org/student_subscriptions/ and contact Dennis Giza at dfg2@columbia.edu.*

1. THE NEW INVESTIGATORS (pp. 22–27): Nonprofits fight to fill the investigative journalism void.

a) Is it fair to compare investigative journalism to opera, as a once-popular field that now needs subsidies as a niche market? Is the problem for investigative journalism that it's lost its popular appeal, or that newspaper profits are no longer enough to cover an expensive newsgathering operation that brings in little revenue on its own?

b) Do you agree with Drew's argument that in order to earn donor cash, nonprofits need to produce more tangible results than the "buzz" and "eyeballs" that dot-coms chased a decade ago? If you were a donor, how would you ensure that investigative nonprofits turned your money into meaningful reporting?

c) What do you think of Jeff Leen's contention that donor influence won't introduce bias into reporting, because investigative projects are under high scrutiny? Are there additional risks, such as journalists engaging in self-censorship or avoiding some topics entirely to avoid angering donors?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: **d)** Visit three of the nonprofit investigative Web sites listed on page 24, and compare their strengths and weaknesses. Which do you think does the best job of presenting quality journalism? Which do you think is likely to most appeal to donors? **e)** Read the Center on Public Integrity's series "Sexual Assault on Campus" (http://www.publicintegrity.org/investigations/campus_assault/). Would a traditional newspaper have conducted the investigation differently? Which approach is stronger?

In This Issue

One of the trickiest challenges for journalism in coming years is likely to be how to keep investigative reporting alive in an age of shrinking budgets. Traditionally made possible by the substantial overhead of large news organizations (it would have been hard for Woodward and Bernstein to spend weeks tracking down leads as bloggers), investigative journalism is something that everyone wants to keep, but no one knows how to pay for.

This issue of *CJR* presents several different perspectives on investigative reporting and the questions regarding its future. Jill Drew looks at the complex challenges facing California Watch and other nonprofit enterprises that are hoping to take on the mantle of investigative reporting — even when it runs afoul of their funders' own agendas. Barbara Moran relates how difficult investigative research can be with a recounting of her efforts to excavate 40-year-old nuclear accident records. And Lisa Anderson profiles Dallas TV station WFAA, which has found success by pouring resources into investigations even as its competitors shy away from them.

Meanwhile, Maureen Tkacik approaches the issue from another angle: the degree to which today's journalism is less about investigations than promoting products — whether the literal products advertised in newspapers and promoted in its coverage, or the "brands" of the reporters who are conducting it.

2. CAN LOCAL TELEVISION AFFORD INVESTIGATIONS? (pp. 28–31): A Texas TV station bucks the trend of banishing in-depth reporting from the small screen.

a) Does WFAA's experience suggest that news outlets should seek to find a way to break down walls between "investigative" and breaking news, for the benefit of both kinds of stories? What are some of the strengths and drawbacks of such an approach?

b) What does the necessity of paying lawyers $500 an hour to vet sensitive reports say about the possibilities for other independent outlets, such as nonprofit organizations or blogs, to do investigative work? Or does the fact that investigative journalism does exist beyond large corporate media suggest that TV stations are being too cautious in their concerns about legal ramifications?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: **c)** Email news producers at your local TV station and ask them what resources they devote to investigative reporting. Would they consider an investigative team along the lines of WFAA's? If not, why not?

3. LOOK AT ME! (pp. 32–40): A journalist's career sheds light on the "nothing-based economy."

a) Is the line between "news" and "opinion" meaningful to TV viewers? What means do TV networks use to draw this distinction, as opposed to the separation of news and op-ed pages in newspapers?

b) Is it fair to sum up newspapers as "creating artificial demand for a lot of stuff that people didn't actually need"? Does Tkacik mean ads, articles, or both?

c) Does Tkacik's article serve as a sort of branding of the author herself? When she recalls her complaints about the "virulent new self-obsessed model for journalistic success," do you think she still agrees that it can, or should, be stopped?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: **d)** Visit Jezebel.com and read Slate's article, "The Trouble With Jezebel" (http://www.doublex.com/section/news-politics/trouble-jezebel?page=9). What do you think of its presentation of women's issues? Do you agree with Tkacik's contention that discussion of her personal life enabled her to "more honestly confront feminist pieties and hypocrisies"? **e)** Read the New York Times article "The Rising Stars of Gossip Blogs" (http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/01/fashion/01gossips.html), then visit some of the blogs in question. Do you agree with Tkacik that the Times is needlessly dismissive of the bloggers by casting their writing as "gossip" and running full-body photos of the bloggers?

4. DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE (pp. 46–49): Researching history's worst nuclear-weapons accident doesn't get easier with time.

a) What does it indicate that even with the help of the Freedom of Information Act, some documents remained hard to track down? Does Moran's observation that FOIA "worked only when I was lucky and persistent—and had lots and lots of time" have implications for who can realistically conduct investigative journalism?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: **b)** Contact two investigative reporters and ask how they balance time constraints with the desire to be thorough – at what point is it "enough" research? How do they draw the line differently for, say, book vs. magazine articles?

Quick Takes

Read these short articles in class and discuss:

1) **Darts & Laurels (p. 13):** Why do you think Ken Bensinger was the only reporter to notice the federal transportation safety data? How can more journalists be encouraged to notice these kinds of public documents sooner?

2) **Bite the Hand That Feeds (pp. 14–16):** Imagine, as the author suggests, that you're a director of a nonprofit journalism outlet that is investigating policies that are supported by your biggest funder. Would you discuss the investigation with your funder before running the story? Is there any way to sidestep the self-censorship that comes with wanting to avoid topics that could create these kinds of conflicts of interest?

3) **Embrace the Wonk (pp. 17–18):** Do you agree with John Sides' contention that "no one gets paid to say 'We don't and can't know'" what voters really want, but that "that's what we should be saying"? How does the success of analysis-based Web sites like Fivethirtyeight.com factor into this assessment? Does political science have a different place in reporting for casual and more politically engaged audiences?

4) **French Connections (p. 63):** Are you surprised at Rodney Benson's findings that French news coverage includes more criticism of the government than U.S. coverage? Does the U.S. standard of "balancing the views of major parties" necessarily equate to more objective reporting?