

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/ or contact Dennis Giza at dfg2@columbia.edu.

1. THE NEWSPAPER THAT ALMOST SEIZED THE FUTURE (pp. 64–82): The *San Jose Mercury News* was at the top of the journalism world in the 1990s. Then it all came apart.

- a) If you had been at the helm of the *Mercury News* during its decline, would you have handled things any differently? Was failure to adapt to new technologies the problem, as Shapiro suggests, or was it impossible to adapt to a world where readers no longer had to pay to place classified ads?
- b) Do you agree that “while the work [reporters] did may have made for an informed and entertained citizenry, it was the classifieds that many readers wanted and needed”? Or was the significance of classifieds not that readers wanted them more, but that newspapers could more easily charge for them, thanks to their monopoly control over the ad market?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) Poll your friends and family: What “premium content” would they be willing to pay for online, and how much? Do they currently subscribe to any online pay services? Write a 1,000-word memo, as if to a newspaper publisher, on whether modern readers are still willing to pay subscription fees in the age of free, ad-supported services like Google and Facebook, and how news outlets should market their content accordingly.

2. THE REPORTER'S VOICE (pp. 83–112): Eight journalists describe what they do and why it's important.

- a) Discuss Stanley Nelson's assessment that while writing is “fun,” reporting is “the key to being a journalist,” and Isabel Wilkerson's dictum that one should spend four to five times as much time reporting as writing. Which is more important, good research or good writing? Can the two be completely separated? How does this affect the time it takes to write a truly well-researched article?
- b) What are the pros and cons of presenting a developing story even as the reporter learns about it, as Nelson did with the Frank Morris murder case? How can a reporter or editor tell when it's the right moment to publish a story, and when it's best to hold on to it until more information is uncovered? Are readers' expectations

In This Issue



This month marks 50 years of publishing for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, and the resulting anniversary issue is jam-packed with looks back at the last half-century of journalism, and forward to its future. There's a timeline of great (and not-so-great) moments in journalism history, and a selection of five decades of photos of reporters on the job; Michael Shapiro looks at the rise and fall of the once-cutting-edge *San Jose Mercury News*; eight accomplished journalists share their views on why they do what they do, how they do it, and why it remains vitally important.

There's also a whole section of articles looking ahead to the future of journalism, with some startling criticisms of how “innovation” has been pursued ... and far, far too much else in this 166-page special issue to summarize here. Dig in, and prepare for the next 50 years.

of this any different in the web age? How do you balance Nelson's appreciation of the value of reader feedback with Dana Priest's concern about sources drying up if you publish a story too soon?

- c) Consider Nelson's description of a source who wouldn't talk with him after he arrived with a camera crew and Priest's remark that "people are paranoid about the telephone." How much do reporters need to think about how the technology they use affects the information they receive? Should this be taken into consideration when news outlets make decisions about how to present multimedia coverage?
- d) Compare Ken Ward Jr.'s remark that "there's a difference between an inherent, emotional bias against something and really looking at it in a scientific sort of manner" with Alan Schwarz's that "they were telling me two plus two equaled five, and I knew they were wrong." Do you think that Ward and Schwarz were using only facts, not their own judgment of what's important, to determine what to cover? How can journalists ensure that they're using their "sustained outrage," as Ned Chilton III put it, to drive fact-based reporting?
- e) Do you think that media coverage of Iraq ever completely portrayed Anthony Shadid's assessment that one-third of Iraqis saw the U.S. military presence as an occupation, one-third as a liberation, and one-third weren't sure? Or that a decade of sanctions had previously "destroyed that society" in the 1990s? If so, what outlets do you remember explaining those stories the best?
- f) What do you think Priest means by "You find stories everywhere"? How does she determine what's a good story when she hears one? What skills could you use to decide what's news and what isn't?
- g) What are the positive and negative effects of scoop-driven journalism, as Ben Smith describes it? Would Schwarz's readers have been better served if he'd published his 88 Plan analysis before getting "scooped" by the NFL itself, or was he right to wait? Are there ways to get the benefits of the drive to compete with other outlets without encouraging reporters to value being first over being best?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: h) Visit Andrea Bruce's website (andreabruce.com). Do her photos achieve her goal of "community journalism" for foreign nations? Which photos, if any, do you think were worth Bruce risking her life to take them? **i)** Visit Ward's Coal Tattoo blog (blogs.wvgazette.com/coalatattoo/). How does it compare both with standard newspaper coverage, and with typical blog coverage? Do Ward's complaints about the difficulties of debunking "false facts" have implications for the limitations of citizen journalism in the absence of paid professionals? **j)** Go online to find examples of the work of each of the journalists profiled here. Which do you most want to read more of? Whose career path would you most like to pursue?

3. WHAT ABOUT MODESTO? (pp. 145–152): For the small, impoverished city of Modesto, California, digital news remains mostly an unfulfilled promise.

- a) How significant is it that socioeconomic class is the key determinant of whether one engages in blogging, social networking, or video posting? How does this likely affect what digital content is available to web readers? Discuss as a class possible ways to encourage greater web use by lower-income individuals. Who, if anyone, should be responsible for pursuing these strategies?
- b) What would you do if your college cancelled its journalism program while you were a student there? Is setting up a news site independent of the school a reasonable substitute?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) Spend an hour searching the web for all the current news you can find about Modesto. What's covered well, and what poorly? If you were proposing a news startup for the city, what form would it take?

4. ON FACEBOOK AND FREEDOM (pp. 155–161): Journalistic outlets need to safeguard online news from being subsumed into Facebook and other proprietary online platforms.

- a) When news sites place Facebook "Like" buttons and similar logos on their stories, does that help to promote their reporting, serve as advertising for Facebook, or both? If you were operating a news organization, what buttons would you choose to place on your site, and why?
- b) Do you agree with Peters that there's a danger that Facebook will become a "circumscribed Internet" for many users and that it will limit them to consuming information rather than create it. How well does that scenario describe the online activities of you and your classmates?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) Collect all the news items posted in a single day by your Facebook friends. How well informed are you by reading these, compared to a daily newspaper, a TV news program, or Google News? Does the fact that the items are all selected by people you know limit their breadth, or ensure that the topics and perspectives are more likely to be of interest to you? Do you see this as a replacement for or a complement to other ways of finding news stories?