

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. HOT AIR (pp. 24–28): TV weathermen are disproportionately skeptics of climate change — and they have plenty of people listening.

- a) If weathercasters don't generally have science training, why do you think they get media coverage for their critiques of climate change? Is this just an example of the media's love for man-bites-dog journalism, or does it reveal a deeper problem with how sources are selected?
- b) In a recent interview with PoynterOnline, the *New York Times*' Natalie Angier warned that science reporting is "basically going out of existence" thanks to budget cuts. Where do you get most of your information on science news?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) Run a Google or Nexis search to see which news outlets have most cited John Coleman on climate issues. Does this suggest anything about why he's achieved media prominence? d) Should TV meteorologists be allowed by their employers to speak their personal opinions on controversial topics? Write a short op-ed arguing your position.

2. MOSCOW'S NEW RULES (pp. 29–33): Even as Russia's independent newspapers are gobbled up by pro-government owners, new startups are keeping free speech alive.

- a) Thomas de Waal says that the killing of Russian journalists creates a chilling effect on other reporters, who are fearful of the consequences of following stories that might get them in trouble. If you were reporting in Russia, how would you decide which stories to follow? Would you accept an assignment there?
- b) Does the fact that newspapers in Russia were "increasingly politicized" after they began taking state subsidies have lessons for those proposing government funding of newspapers in the U.S.? Or do NPR and PBS show that the U.S. system has sufficient safeguards in place?

In This Issue



Television weather forecasters occupy an odd place in the media landscape: Not exactly journalists, not really scientists (only half even have a college degree in meteorology or a related field), they're nonetheless the face of science to millions of viewers.

That's why researchers were surprised — and alarmed — to learn that, as Charles Homans reports, most TV weathermen disagree with the scientific consensus that global climate change is being caused by human activities. Homans explores the reasons why, and the consequences on public scientific discourse.

Also in this issue, we talk to four downsized journalists to find out how the news business looks from the outside. Adam Federman examines independent media startups that are helping counter media consolidation in Russia. Robert Sietsema serves up a detailed history of newspaper restaurant criticism, and why food blogs may be its ruin. And Georgina Gustin critiques reporting on genetically modified crops, and its reliance on industry surveys. Bon appetit.

- c) How does the Russian practice of “dzhinsa” compare to U.S. trends in advertiser-supplied content like advertorials and video news releases? What steps should U.S. media take to ensure that readers can tell independent content from ads or p.r. materials, especially in an age of shrinking revenues?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: d) Visit the English-language version of Novaya Gazeta (en.novayagazeta.ru) and, using Google Translate, the other Web sites mentioned in this article, such as newtimes.ru, forbesrussia.ru, newsru.com, and grani.ru. What U.S. outlets would you say they remind you of? Which would you trust the most, and why?

3. THE VIEW FROM OUT HERE (pp. 34–41): Four downsized journalists look back at the state of the industry.

- a) Brenda Butler tells Don Terry that as far as having people of color in the newsroom, journalism has “stagnated.” Do you think this is accurate, and if so, what do you think is causing it?
- b) Does Terry’s story imply that we’ll soon see more people doing journalism as an unpaid avocation instead of career? How would that change the kind of journalism being done?
- c) In logging her reading of the daily papers, Jill Drew notes a long feature that she skipped because it “looked like a time sink.” What does this indicate about Don Terry’s concern that there’s no place for 5,000-word newspaper stories anymore? Are there formats where people will still read long articles, or is it better to break up complex topics into smaller chunks?
- d) How much time do you spend reading newspapers every day? How much do you spend reading news online? Would you read more newspapers if you had more time? If you had fewer alternatives for news?
- e) Is McDermott correct that blog writing style will encourage newspapers to shed some of their “soporific” writing style, and stop hiding behind “balanced” sources? What are the pros and cons of this approach?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: f) Find a story in the local paper that qualifies as a “faux trend” story along the lines of mentioned by Drew. Email the author, or the paper’s editor, and ask why they felt it was newsworthy. Are these stories popular with readers? Easier to report? **g)** Select a newspaper story and rewrite it in a more blog-like style, taking care to dispense with the “soporific” newspaper standards that McDermott criticizes. What’s gained in the translation, and what’s lost?

4. EVERYBODY EATS... (pp. 42–46): Restaurant reviews took three decades to evolve to their current form. Have food blogs killed them?

- a) In the excerpt of Mimi Sheraton’s review of Le Cherche Midi, what is she assuming about her audience? Should food critics be writing for restaurant-savvy “foodies” or for a general readership?
- b) How does Sietsema’s conclusion that criticism should be “an elite enterprise” jibe with his origins as a self-published zine author? Is it the amateur nature of blogs, or their immediacy, that has the most impact?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) Write a one-page comparison of a restaurant review in your local newspaper from 2009, and from 1999. What differences do you note in tone, in approach, and in what information is provided?

Quick Takes

Read these short articles in class and discuss:

- 1) Nairobi Postcard (pp. 17–18):** Do you think that Daniel Kasajja Orubia is right when he insists, “I’ll still be reading newspapers in twenty years?” Didn’t devoted readers in the U.S. make this same claim ten years ago? Is culture or technology the main determining factor in news reading habits?
- 2) Banned in Britain (pp. 19–21):** In the age of online access, can coverage by international news outlets be another way to get around restrictive libel laws? Or do you think that Twitter’s immediacy and decentralization is more promising?
- 3) Seeds of Change (pp. 47–49):** How should journalists report a story where only one side makes statistics available? Is it journalists’ role to demand independent research, or just to report to readers when it doesn’t exist?
- 4) A Distant Echo (pp. 55–57):** Why do you think Father Coughlin achieved such political power? Do you see the same thing happening to Glenn Beck? Why do you think Beck is discussed in the media as a future presidential candidate while other opinionated media figures with devoted followings, such as Rachel Maddow, are not?
- 5) Friend and Faux (pp. 59–62):** Do you think that media parodies like *The Thick of It* and *The Daily Show* help influence news outlets to improve their coverage? Or do they just allow them to laugh at themselves without taking any steps to change?