

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. A NARROWED GAZE (pp. 24–30): How the business press became focused on serving investors rather than the public.

- a) When, if ever, should newspapers focus on providing information to help investors make money? If inside business information is a main reason why people buy *The Wall Street Journal*, for example, can that paper's editors be expected to devote as much coverage to larger economic stories?
- b) Are even investors well served by covering the stock market as if it were a sporting event? Is the problem with who the business press sees as its audience, or with its presentation?
- c) Do you think it's possible for business reporters to fight for scoops on news like mergers without getting too close to their sources? Is this more of a problem on the business beat than in other areas?
- d) How many of your classmates regularly read the business pages or watch business news channels, and why? Would they be as interested in, say, news that covered the economic effects of corporate actions?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: e) Watch Jon Stewart's interview of CNBC's Jim Cramer (bit.ly/cjr-stewart-cramer). Do you agree with Stewart's criticism of CNBC as having been insufficiently critical of the financial system that helped create the mortgage crisis? Have actual professional journalists done enough to investigate the questions that Stewart raised? **f)** Watch an hour of CNBC or other business coverage, and read the business section of your local newspaper. How well do you feel it serves you in understanding the economy? If you were in charge of your own business media outlet, what would you instruct your reporters to cover? **g)** What would it look like to, as Starkman suggests, "serve the [financial] market while also looking beyond it"? Write a one-page memo listing directives for how to do so, either for a media publication or in your own reporting.

2. THE TIMES AND THE JEWS (pp. 31–38): Why claims of an anti-Israel bias at the *New York Times* are off the mark.

- a) What do you think the *Times* should strive for in its Israel coverage? Is it possible to present a picture that is

In This Issue



The *Columbia Journalism Review* kicks off its second half-century with a cover story by Dean Starkman that takes on the business media, and their increasing focus on investor advice at the expense of investigative reporting into the effects that business and finance have on the lives of ordinary people.

Neil A. Lewis follows with a look at the *New York Times'* turbulent history with Jewish readers over coverage of Israel, and concludes that charges of bias are unfounded. Jake Batsell looks at how demand for information about high-school football is driving news reporting, and news technology, in Texas. Ivan G. Goldman recounts the controversial takeover that helped doom *The Ring* magazine. And our year-long "Reporter's Voice" series continues, with Iraqi architect-turned-journalist Ghaith Abdul-Ahad reflecting on his war reporting in his native country, Afghanistan, and Libya.

going to seem fair to the Israeli government, Palestinians and their supporters, as well as Jews of all ideological stripes? What does it mean to “operate in the middle” on this issue, and is the middle necessarily going to provide the most accurate reporting?

- b) Do you think it’s true that the Palestinians have built sympathy among foreign journalists as they’ve become seen more as underdogs? Does that dynamic work for opposition groups in most other nations?
- c) Poll your class: Do they think that a reporter’s Judaism should make them more or less qualified to cover Israel, or should it make no difference? Should newspapers seek out or avoid Iraqis (or non-Iraqi Arabs) to cover events in Iraq? Reporters with family members in the military to cover the Defense Department? At what point does a personal connection help a reporter understand the issues, and at what point does it risk bias?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: d) Read several recent stories on Israel published in the Times, and compare them with coverage of the same events in The Washington Post, CNN, or BBC. Which do you prefer, and why?

3. THE ACCIDENTAL CORRESPONDENT (pp. 46–49): Ghaith Abdul-Ahad’s unlikely path from draft-dodging Iraqi architect to war reporter.

- a) Should more Western news agencies be seeking out locals who can report on foreign events with an insider’s eye? Can Abdul-Ahad serve as a model for coverage, or is he an exception?
- c) Abdul-Ahad notes that by the time he became a reporter, he had already reached the conclusion that the US occupation of Iraq was wrong. Do you think that biases him as a reporter? Is it preferable to have reporters who have already thought hard about the subjects they cover, or those who are relative blank slates?
- d) After reading Abdul-Ahad’s description of embeds, do you think journalists should continue to accept these assignments? Is there a way to report on them that acknowledges the dehumanizing effects, and uses that to inform readers?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: e) Read several of Abdul-Ahad’s dispatches for the Guardian (bit.ly/cjr-abdul-ahad). How do they differ from other reporting you’ve read from the Middle East? In particular, do you think he succeeds in putting a human face on insurgents without either valorizing or demonizing them? How much of that do you think is the result of his perspective as a native Iraqi, and how much of his writing and reporting skills? **f)** Read the recent coverage of Iraq on your local newspaper’s site. Write a one-page letter to the editors, critiquing the paper’s Iraq reporting and making concrete suggestions for how it could be improved.

Quick Takes

Read these short articles in class and discuss:

- 1) **Florida Roots (pp. 10–11):** Do you agree with Carl Hiaasen that complicated issues like environmental coverage are endangered when journalism becomes “shorter and more bite-sized”? Would you read a newspaper or news site that skimmed on other coverage in order to devote more resources to in-depth reporting on a few important topics?
- 2) **The Velvet Rope (pp. 11–12):** Do you agree with the assessment that the web feels like the “straight to video” of journalism? All other things being equal, would you prefer writing for print over writing for the web? Or are there pluses to online publications as well?
- 3) **Darts & Laurels (p. 13):** Should The Miami Herald have gone ahead and reported on the Univision controversy based solely on anonymous sources with no firsthand knowledge of the incident, in your opinion? Where should the line be drawn on when to publish potentially important information when there is no on-the-record source?
- 4) **Get Real (pp. 17–18):** Is there an important difference between shaping a documentary by selective editing and feeding people lines, as reality show producers do? Do you think the latter misleads viewers, or that viewers are savvy enough to realize that what’s presented on the screen is influenced by the dramatic needs of the show?
- 5) **What Scientist Shortage? (pp. 19–20):** Are journalists doing enough to investigate claims of a shortfall in STEM graduates? Why do you think companies and universities have been able to get away with perpetuating the myth of a scientist shortage?
- 6) **When the 99% Had a Paper (pp. 55–57):** What do you think of Ralph Ingersoll’s contention that advertising corrupts the English language and threatens journalists’ independence? Is this inevitably true? And even if it is, is advertising a necessary compromise in order to make journalism a viable business? What additional safeguards can help allay the dangers of seeking to serve advertisers, and how many current news outlets have them in place?
- 7) **The Algorithm Method (p. 63):** Do you typically read comment sections on online articles? Are they ever informative? Are there any sites that maintain a more intelligent level of discussion, and if so, have they instituted any policies helping to promote this that could be adopted by other news outlets?