

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 SECOND CHANCE (pp. 24–29): Can e-readers provide salvation for newspapers' bottom lines?

- a) How many of your classmates have used electronic readers like iPads or Kindles? Would you rather read news there, in print, or on a computer? Do you care enough about "news that looks like news" to pay extra for it, if it's free online?
- b) How many news outlets do you usually read in a given week? How many would you consider subscribing to? Would you sooner use a pay-per-newspaper subscription system or a pay-per-article one?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) Visit two local news Web sites. Do they seem like a "chaos of links, summation, images, and ads," as Brainard says? Would you pay extra to receive news that's better organized?

2. JUSTICE FOR JOHN CONROY (pp. 30–35): A reporter who exposed police torture finds himself out of work even as the ringleader goes to trial.

- a) If newspapers can no longer afford reporters who aren't "in the paper every week," what does that say about the future of journalism? Is there a way to reconcile in-depth investigation with the demand for more frequent articles?

- b) What do you think of Conroy's statement that his article about being mugged got more response than his articles about men falsely accused of murder? Is reader feedback the best way to gauge what readers want?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) Read John Conroy's Chicago Reader articles on the police torture scandal (bit.ly/readerjohnconroy), and his subsequent blog entries for WBEZ on the trial of Jon Burge (blogs.vocalo.org/blog/wbez/burge-trial). What's gained and lost by covering the story in a blog format? Do you think Conroy's initial exposé could have had the same impact if presented in a blog? **d)** Read the coverage of the Burge trial in other Chicago-area news outlets. What's lost from the public discourse when veteran reporters are forced off of a beat they've long covered?

In This Issue

As newspapers struggle to determine what the future of their industry will look like, all kinds of would-be saviors have been put forward, from new technologies to nonprofit institutions to novel for-profit business models.



This issue of *CJR* casts a light on the changes roiling the newspaper world, and the consequences for some of journalism's most dedicated practitioners. Curtis Brainard explores the promise and the pitfalls of mobile e-readers, which some hope could provide new ways for newspapers to get needed revenue from their readers. Chrystia Freeland examines the rise of "private news," where outlets such as Bloomberg and Thomson Reuters underwrite their general-interest news coverage with data sales to niche interests. And Jake Batsell focuses on the Texas Tribune, whose mix of raw data and irreverent commentary offers a new vision of public-interest journalism.

As the news world changes, there have been casualties as well. Lisa Anderson tracks down former staffers for the Newark *Star-Ledger* who lost their jobs in the massive wave of layoffs that paper instituted starting in 2008, and finds that while most are again employed, many miss life in a daily newsroom. And Don Terry profiles one particular victim of newspaper layoffs: the *Chicago Reader*'s John Conroy, who uncovered a police torture racket in that city only to be laid off just as the ringleader's trial was set to begin. If journalism is to have a future, it will need to figure out how to make use of its most valuable assets: its reporters.

3. LONE STAR TRAILBLAZER (pp. 39–43): Can the Texas Tribune remake the shape of journalism?

- a) Tribune database specialists Matt Stiles and Niran Babalola say that “publishing data *is* news,” and Batsell asserts that in the future “more readers will prefer searchable databases as an alternative to the media’s traditional gatekeeping role.” Does this match your own expectations for news outlets? How much do you want reporters to provide you with raw data to make your own interpretations, and how much do you want them to help you interpret it?
- b) John Thornton describes his realization that maybe journalism “is a public good just like national defense, clean air, clean water.” Does this imply that, like other services with broad beneficiaries who aren’t willing or able to pay for them, journalism should receive government subsidies?
- c) What do you think of high editor salaries at nonprofit journalism outlets? Do news organizations need to spend to attract the best, or to keep costs as low as possible? Would knowing about a lucrative editor salary affect whether you gave money to such an outlet?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: d) View a Stump Interrupted video at Texastribune.org (for example, bit.ly/stump-cjr). Do the “pop-ups” and animations help provide context for politicians’ pronouncements, or trivialize them? What does this indicate about what Batsell calls the Tribune’s “sense of humor and [willingness] to try new things, fail, and try again”?
e) Read the section on new sources of independent news reporting in Leonard Downie Jr. and Michael Schudson’s October 2009 essay, “The Reconstruction of American Journalism,” at cjr.org. How does the Tribune’s “blend of NPR-style memberships, corporate sponsors, events, and specialty publications” differ from other nonprofit news outlets?

4. AFTER THE STORM (pp. 44–49): A survey of laid-off Newark *Star-Ledger* journalists finds that life after a daily newspaper isn’t always easy.

- a) In retrospect, does the Newark *Star-Ledger* “fairy tale” seem admirable or deluded? When Anderson writes that “money never seemed to be a major impediment to newsgathering,” was that shielding employees from having to worry about the business side of journalism, or giving them unrealistic expectations about the paper’s future?
- b) How do the stories presented by Anderson differ, if at all, from those of other mid-career white-collar workers forced to start from scratch? Do their stories tell us anything special about the fate of journalists, or just about the state of the current economy?
- c) Does a dedicated education reporter seem like an “unaffordable luxury,” as *The Star-Ledger* indicated? How does the role of a daily newspaper—compared to blogs and other news sources—change if targeted beats are eliminated?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: d) Visit NewJerseyNewsroom.com and NJSpotlight.com. Do these seem like they could become viable replacements for a daily newspaper? How does the low-paid status of their writing staffs affect their news coverage?

Quick Takes

Read these short articles in class and discuss:

- 1) **Bold Move (p. 12):** Does *The Bold Italic* seem like a promising new model, or a stealth attempt by traditional media to cash in on the popularity of blogs and other first-person writing? Is its targeted ad placement disturbing, or by now an accepted fact of life on the Web?
- 2) **Darts & Laurels (p. 13):** Do you accept Wired’s argument that because it was trying to present Notarbartolo’s point of view, it didn’t need to explore other facts? What are the responsibilities of journalists to their readers to fact-check, even in profiles that are clearly in a source’s own words?
- 3) **The Trouble With Experts (pp. 17–18):** Does direct access to experts on the Web allow more freedom to choose trusted sources, or make it more difficult to determine which ones to trust? How much truth is there to FakeAPStylebook’s quip that an expert is “anyone to whom you can effectively feed quotes”?
- 4) **Message Control (pp. 19–20):** What’s the best way for the news media to respond when government officials refuse to provide access? Does the rise of the Internet mean that journalists now need the president more than he needs them?
- 5) **The Rise of Private News (pp. 36–38):** Can you think of other subject areas where “public” news can be a loss leader for “private” news, as with Bloomberg and its data terminals? Do arrangements like these help push “business” coverage to be about how to make money on the stock market (or the price of uranium, as Wenig says), not broader issues of the economy, labor issues, and so on?