

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. CROSSFIRE IN KANDAHAR (pp. 25–33): For journalists in Afghanistan, getting your facts straight can be a tricky business.

- a) Do you see lessons in Afghanistan for reporters everywhere about the nature of truth and the need for skepticism? Or is Afghanistan so different—"a complex place, littered with overlapping, conflicting accounts"—that the normal rules simply don't apply?
- b) After reading Gezari's account, why do you think that NATO was interrogating Afghan journalists like Nader and Nekzad? How would you approach reporting this story, if you were on the scene?
- c) Do you think that Nader and Nekzad's actions, as portrayed by Allawi, crossed a line? And was this enough to justify their arrest, or just a breach of journalistic ethics?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: **d)** Read Gezari's recent Pulitzer articles (bit.ly/cjr-gezari). How does she approach reporting on Afghanistan when faced with unreliable sources? **e)** Write an op-ed proposing rules for the military in how to deal and not to deal with journalists in foreign nations. How should it be decided whether an individual's contacts with opposing military forces should be accepted as necessary journalistic research?

2. A TELEVISION DEAL FOR THE DIGITAL AGE (pp. 34–38): Comcast's bid to merge with NBC Universal could change the way we watch TV.

- a) Would you be willing to pay for online access to TV programs? Would it matter if the programming were commercial-free or not? Do you think that this can be a viable business model?

In This Issue



Knowing when to trust your sources is an ever-present challenge for journalists, whether you're reporting on city council hearings or a foreign war. But this dilemma is especially daunting for those reporting on Afghanistan, a country where—as NATO found out to its dismay—one can never be sure whether even a Taliban leader really is who he says he is. Veteran Afghanistan reporter Vanessa M. Gezari tells how the vagaries of ferreting out the truth came into play in her investigation of the arrest and interrogation of two Afghan journalists by NATO forces.

Another journalist who's struggled with reporting on a war zone is *The New Yorker's* Philip Gourevitch, who's become the West's best-known chronicler of the Rwandan genocide. Yet some human rights organizers, reports Tristan McConnell, charge Gourevitch with being too soft on current Rwanda president Paul Kagame's treatment of his people.

The other great mystery facing today's journalists, of course, remains the future of the news industry itself. John Dunbar explores the proposed merger of programming giant NBC Universal with cable giant Comcast, and concludes that unless the government steps in, the result could be disastrous for open competition both on TV and on the Internet. Finally, Charles M. Madigan and Tim Townsend look at the future of the once-great Tribune company as it emerges from bankruptcy, and the new paths it is charting into the future.

b) Poll your classmates: How many of them do not have either cable or satellite TV subscriptions? How do they watch TV programming, or do they? What does this indicate for the future of TV services?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) Research newspaper and online coverage of the Comcast-NBC merger. Do you think it adequately explains the issues at stake? What further questions would you like to see answered? Write a pitch for a 1500-word story that would examine the deal in greater detail and fill in any holes in existing coverage. d) Read FCC chair Julius Genachowski's proposals for conditions of approving the Comcast-NBC merger. Do you think, after reading Dunbar's article, that these are necessary, or sufficient? What regulations, if any, would you impose if you were an FCC commissioner? Or would you allow the deal at all?

3. ONE MAN'S RWANDA (pp. 39–43): Philip Gourevitch has been the West's most renowned chronicler of the Rwandan massacre. But has he helped to whitewash Rwanda's current president?

- a) How much responsibility do journalists have to consider how their reporting will affect the reputation of a world leader? Is the consideration different for magazine essayists as opposed to daily newspaper reporters?
- b) If more critical reporting of Kagame is starting to appear, does this indicate that Gourevitch's take on his presidency is less important? Is it inevitable that every chronicler will have blind spots, indicating the need for a variety of different reporters covering the same topic to give a full picture?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) Read Gourevitch's August 2010 New Yorker blog entry in which he responds to the United Nations report on human rights abuses by the Rwandan government (nyr.kr/cjr-gourevitch-blog). Does it seem like a fair analysis of the situation? If you were his editor, would you ask him to do anything differently in reporting this story?

4. WELCOME TO TRIBUNE COMPANY (pp. 44–47): How to make the *Chicago Tribune* great again.

- a) What does it mean to you when Madigan says that the "*Tribune* is about news"? Do you agree that there's an untapped demand for "serious news reporting" that cries out to be filled?
- b) Ask your classmates where their reading falls on the "Gaza vs. Gaga" spectrum: Do they read entertainment news, serious news, or both? Do you think a newspaper can afford to do both effectively, or do they appeal to two different readerships?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) Read one day's worth of articles at chicagotribune.com. What do you see as the paper's strengths and weaknesses? Write your own set of recommendations for remaking the Tribune to retain its historic dedication to news reporting, while making itself more appealing to new readers.

Quick Takes

Read these short articles in class and discuss:

- 1) **Long-Form Saviors (pp. 11–12):** Would you be more likely to read long-form articles via an app like Instapaper or Readability? Would you be willing to pay for the service, and if so how much? Would you pay extra to get content ad-free?
- 2) **Darts & Laurels (p. 13):** What does it indicate to you that it took so long to find the prosecutor's public statement that helped to exonerate Graves? How can journalists better help to avoid miscarriages of justice before eighteen years have passed?
- 3) **The Pornography Trap (pp. 14–16):** Is the problem of anecdotal ledes specific to rape stories, or is there always a risk of objectifying people by using them as case studies for a larger point being made? How can journalists best present the real lives of individuals without becoming voyeuristic? Does Quist-Arcton's NPR story seem like a better model?
- 4) **New Media Tips From Jacob Riis (pp. 17–18):** Can you draw any lessons for new-media reporting from Jacob Riis' use of photography? What, if any, good uses have you seen of multimedia technology to "expand and enhance the telling of stories"?
- 5) **Spain's Not-So-Free Press (pp. 19–20):** How necessary are right-to-know laws to the ability to conduct serious investigative journalism? Does it change your thinking any to know that the U.S. Freedom of Information Act was first passed in 1966? What can—and should—Spanish media be doing to encourage passage of such laws in their nation?
- 6) **Her Great Depression (pp. 51–53):** Do you agree that what people want from memoirs (of lesser-known people, at least) is a recounting of small failures to remind them of their own imperfect lives? What memoirs have you read and enjoyed, and why?