

# COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

## Opening Shot



TORNADOES LIKE THIS ONE TOUCHING DOWN IN KANSAS ARE NOTHING NEW. Singularly extreme weather events may or may not be linked to climate change, but as scientists connect data dots, doubts about the reality of climate change are no longer the point — the issue is how to prevent them. What role can journalists play in this vital issue? What role *should* they play? Is spreading the word that climate change is a reality overstepping journalistic boundaries into “cheerleading”? What, if any, are the different sides to the story? As a young journalist, what can you do to better prepare yourself to report on what could be the most important story of your career?

**DISSENT DEFICIT, P. 4:** According to the editorial, the mass media shuts out speech that it considers too far from the mainstream. Where do you think the pressure to do so originates? Who benefits from that policy? Who is harmed by it? Can anything be done to change it? If so, what? If not, why not? Do you agree or disagree with the editorialist’s theory about why the Internet cannot be considered a replacement for the mass media as the proper forum for more extreme viewpoints? Explain. **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Write an article looking into any aspect of the country’s reluctance to examine the reasons behind 9/11. Read the report of the Defense Science Board about 9/11. Suggest three stories that could still come out of it. Summarize each possibility and explain how it might be sourced. Find a copy of Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s controversial speech and read it. How accurate were the reporters and editorial writers who wrote about it? How would you have covered it?

## Talking Points

IN THIS ISSUE, CJR looks at what can happen when journalists take on — or avoid — complex topics such as global warming, crime or the reasons behind 9/11. To really address these vital matters requires a commitment to in-depth reporting and a willingness among editors to both respect and challenge readers and viewers. Too often, however, we have seen credulity instead of skepticism and depth sacrificed for flash. The results, as evident by the war in Iraq and our late start battling climate change, can be catastrophic.

One person who understands this problem is the subject of this issue’s cover story, Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., the publisher of the *New York Times*. Under pressure to produce more profits, Sulzberger responds that what has made the *Times* the standard that other newspapers are measured against is a basic belief that quality takes priority over the bottom line. “The reason why the *Times* has survived when so many of its competitors have faded,” he says, “is because it maintained a strong value system that has always been an essential part of our tradition.”

Can the *Times* continue to maintain that tradition and survive? What would happen if it didn’t? How would your career as a journalist and the lives of all Americans be different if the “grey lady” were to be no more, or, if the newspaper suddenly found itself being run by those who put profits before award-winning journalism?

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**SULZBERGER AT THE BARRICADES, PP. 24-31:** What is the importance of *The New York Times* to our country? Why does it occupy such a lofty perch? Is its influence waning? Why or why not? Comment on Sulzberger's statement of principles that appears in the story's last column.

What do you think are the *Times's* values? Do you think Sulzberger can successfully steer the *Times* onto a more solid financial footing? Why or why not? How do you think the paper will change over the next decade?

**ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** If you were in Sulzberger's place, what would you do to right the company's ship? Research the history of the *Times*. Select five *Times* stories you think had a major impact on this country. Discuss how and why each came about, the impact it had and the reasons for its effectiveness. Pick up a copy of the *Times* and critique it. List what you think are the paper's strengths and weaknesses. If you were the publisher, what changes would you make to the newspaper?

**DRAWING LINES, PP. 41-44:** What does it say that there a need for blogs like Going Home? Why do blogs such as Going Home strike such a chord with readers in ways that general local coverage in the news pages doesn't? Read the latest entries in the Going Home blog. Comment on the blog's tone and the issues it is tackling. What do you like or dislike about it? What can reporters do with blogs that they can't with their news stories?

#### Between the Lines

- 1) According to two entries in "Hard Numbers" (p. 11), most of the coverage of the 2008 presidential primary campaign focused on "horserace coverage." Why was that so?
- 2) If you were in charge of a television news operation, what would your policy be regarding the use of military experts for war analysis (p. 13)?
- 3) Do readers benefit from the ubiquity of amateur snapshots being used by news organizations in place of professional photography? Why or why not? How would you feel as a reporter if you were asked to take your own photos for your stories?
- 4) If you were in Julia Dahl's place (p. 32) would you have cooperated with *America's Most Wanted* to the extent that she did? Why or why not?
- 5) Considering the personal risks, if you were living in Egypt, would you join the ranks of bloggers writing critically about the government and Egyptian society? Explain.
- 6) After reading "Too Good to Be True?" (p. 63), suggest ways that local TV news can be improved, even in this era of tight budgets.

#### Quick Takes

- 1) After reading the questions for the presidential nominees about post-Katrina New Orleans (p. 10), suggest three of your own.
- 2) Find three examples of important photojournalism (not mentioned in the story that begins on p. 14). Explain the reasons for your choices and why you think your examples made the impact they did.
- 3) According to "Endangered Species," in the past "the gifted sportswriter often delivered the best writing in the entire paper." Find three examples of great sports writing reporting. What can you learn from your choices?

One of the writers quoted in the story says the blog compromises the *Detroit News's* credibility. Do you agree or disagree? Why? Should there be restrictions on reporters who blog? Why or why not?

**ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Find similar blogs on local issues done by other newspapers. Contrast them with Going Home. Imagine you were asked to do a similar blog. Write several sample entries about your neighborhood.

**CLIMATE CHANGE: NOW WHAT? PP. 45-49:** What effect did Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth" have on the way climate change is reported? Why do you think it took so long for the mainstream press to accept the notion that climate change is real? Why do you think most people still don't acknowledge the potential dangers of global warming? How would you convince them otherwise? Should you try to do so? The article refers to a lack of skepticism by journalists and politicians when ethanol was first being promoted. What do you think is the reason for that? Are mainstream journalists too timid in general when asked to question generally accepted wisdom? According to the statistics on page 49, environmental coverage is a low priority in the media. Why do you think that is the case? In the last column, the author questions whether *Time* crossed the line and engaged in "environmental cheerleading." Read the issue. Did it? Is "environmental cheerleading" wrong? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Imagine you were the editor of a major newspaper or television news operation, write a memo explaining how you would like environmental issues to be covered in a way that both informs and engages your readers or viewers. What if you were the editor of a smaller more local news operation, how would you cover the environment? Come up with a story for each of the categories listed in the article. Report and write one.

Find a copy of the Agriculture Department report mentioned on page 46. Suggest three stories based on the report. Explain how you think they should be covered.