

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. TESTED (pp. 24–30): In two cities, the potential release and publication of public schoolteacher rating data leads to questions about responsible journalism.

- a) Are journalists generally too quick to report numbers without trying to gauge their validity and put them in the appropriate context? For example, how well do reporters covering sports or political campaigns do with their handling of numbers? How can they improve their performance?
- b) Do you think that you could properly evaluate the meaning of teacher scores? Should reporters be getting more statistical training for these cases, or is it better to rely on professional statisticians as sources?
- c) Is it always better for public information to be made accessible, even if it's potentially misleading? What do you think of GothamSchools' decision not to publish the New York City teacher data?
- d) Is data inherently part of a "corporate" agenda, as Hancock implies? What do you think is the best method of conducting education reporting: telling personal stories, making connections between policy decisions and classroom effects, number-crunching, or some combination of these?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: e) Read stories from the Los Angeles Times series "Grading the Teachers" that first launched investigations into teacher rankings (<http://lat.ms/grading-the-teachers>). Do they seem to you to sensationalize the topic, or provide enough context for readers to understand all the issues? Write a one-page memo to education reporters on how to best cover teacher score issues. **f)** Look through the data-

In This Issue



Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis' famous statement that "sunlight is the best disinfectant" established the idea that making information public is vital to democracy, helping to inspire the Freedom of Information Act. But recent controversies, from WikiLeaks to the public release of teacher ratings, raise the question: Is there such a thing as too much information?

In the case of the teacher data, LynNell Hancock reports how a *Los Angeles Times* investigation into which teachers' students got the highest test scores, and a subsequent FOIA request for similar ratings in New York City, has led to a bitter fight over reporting public data. Is it irresponsible to present data that could be misleading, or should the goal be to provide as much information as possible, and let readers figure out for themselves what conclusions to draw? For WikiLeaks, as Sanford J. Ungar reports, the concern was that release of the data would be less misleading than dangerous. But who should be the arbiters of what information remains "classified"? And what can we learn from past episodes of leaks such as the Pentagon Papers?

Elsewhere in this issue, Amanda Erickson reports on Khadija Ismayilova, whose hard-hitting daily radio show has defied press restrictions in Azerbaijan; Don Terry introduces Greg Scott, who helps journalists navigate Chicago's drug world when he isn't reporting on it himself; and Joel Meares looks at the growing number of journalists providing in-depth reports on their own battles with cancer. Plus, Karen Stabiner's investigation of SEO, which mentions Lady Gaga and *The Simpsons*—made you look!

base of Los Angeles teacher scores on the L.A. Times site (<http://lat.ms/grading-the-teachers>). How well do you think you would be able to draw conclusions from this data?

2. UNNECESSARY SECRETS (pp. 34–38): From the Pentagon Papers to WikiLeaks, who is deciding what information should be marked “classified,” and why?

- a) Does the Pentagon Papers case show that newspapers can be trusted to determine what’s worth of public release without putting the nation or its troops at risk? Do you think this has changed in the era of the Internet and bloggers?
- b) How would you go about covering a trial of Bradley Manning, or of Julian Assange? Is there a way to use such trials to help shed light on the underlying issues, or would they inevitably become sensationalized?
- c) Do you agree with Erwin Griswold that the main concern of those who classify documents is “not with national security, but rather with governmental embarrassment of one sort or another”? What does the fallout from the WikiLeaks exposés, including the overthrow of the government of Tunisia, indicate about the rationales for classification?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: d) Write a 700-word op-ed arguing for a policy of what information should be made publicly available, how quickly it should be made available, and who should be the ones making those decisions.

3. CJR COLUMN MENTIONS *THE SIMPSONS* (pp. 46–49): Does the rise of search engine optimization, or SEO, threaten quality journalism?

- a) Do you agree with Dorian Benkoil that SEO comes down to human nature, that “if it’s straightforward and honest about what it’s about, they’re likelier to click”? How does writing for The Machine differ from writing to attract human eyeballs?
- b) How much has technology changed the way writers try to draw readers? Was “Headless Body in Topless Bar” in some sense the 1970s equivalent of SEO?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) Read today’s headlines on the front page of Google News, and on the front page of your local newspaper. Which is more oriented toward “celebrities and political yelling,” as Harry Shearer says? What commonalities do you see among the types of stories, headlines, and sources that appear most frequently on Google?

d) Read Washington Post columnist Gene Weingarten’s column “Gene Weingarten column mentions Lady Gaga” (<http://wapo.st/weingarten-gaga>). Do you agree with Weingarten that SEO is draining the creativity from headline-writing? Which headline do you find more clever: “A Digital Salute to Online Journalism” or “Gene Weingarten column mentions Lady Gaga”?

Quick Takes

Read these short articles in class and discuss:

- 1) **Members Only (p. 4):** How do you think it will change journalism as more in-depth reporting is funded by \$5,700 subscriptions? Which issues do you think will get covered, and which will get overlooked? What potential solutions do you see to the problems raised by the high-priced subscription model?
- 2) **Darts & Laurels (p. 13):** What do you think of Scott Wasser’s defense that his newspaper’s gift of free ads to the local chamber of commerce was part of its standard procedure of giving away ad space to nonprofits? What ethical standards would you propose for guiding the use of free ad space?
- 3) **Sunrise on the Nile (p. 17):** Do you think that the Egyptian uprising shows “the necessity of honest, fearless reporting as a prerequisite for democratic change”? Which came first, brave journalism, or popular uprising? Or did they go hand in hand? Does the Al Ahran headline “The People Overthrow the Regime” necessarily indicate improved journalism, or just that established media outlets recognized that political power had already shifted?
- 4) **Hiding the Real Africa (pp. 18–21):** How would you try to do journalism in Africa that “challenges people’s thinking,” as Sunny Bindra suggests? Are there any lessons here for domestic reporting as well?
- 5) **The Selfish Bit (pp. 55–56):** Do you agree that new media change “the nature of human thought,” as James Gleick says? Or do existing ways of thinking and communicating find methods for exploiting new media? Consider as examples new forms of communication that have evolved in your lifetimes—from texting and tweets to talk radio and cable news. Is today’s fast-paced information world a result of technological changes, or has the technology been developed to meet fast-paced demands?
- 6) **The Public Screen (p. 63):** If you were a policymaker, how would you use public screens to improve public life? Do you think you could provide programming that would both be informative and make people want to watch?