

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. BREATHING ROOM (pp. 22–28): Al Jazeera and other satellite news channels are at the forefront of change in the Arab world.

- a) Is it a problem that most Arab journalists see their mission as “driving political and social change”? How much does that differ from Joseph Pulitzer’s directive that journalists should “afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted”?
- b) Does the fact that Egyptian journalists began reporting on opposition figures during the Tahrir Square protests indicate a new willingness on the part of Egypt’s media to question the government—or just a recognition that the political winds were shifting? If, as Pintak writes, “true reform is impossible until governments themselves embrace it,” does that present a Catch-22 for Arab media?
- c) Do you think that more US cable systems should offer Al Jazeera English? As more people turn to the web for their video news, does it even matter?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: d) Choose one of the incidents mentioned of Arab nations’ abuse of reporters—the deaths in custody of Bahrainian journalists, Syria’s detention of reporters and hacking of websites, the disappearance of journalists in Libya—and use Google or Nexis to research how much coverage this received in other countries. Does the US media have a responsibility to report more extensively on these kinds of events? **e)** Watch an hour of Al Jazeera English (english.aljazeera.net) and write a one-page analysis of its coverage. How does its approach differ from that of US cable news channels? Do you agree with Hillary Clinton that more people are watching Al Jazeera English in the US “because it’s real news”?

2. ANYBODY THERE? (pp. 29–33): A voicemail-hacking scandal among British tabloids has drawn little media attention within the UK, even from those papers’ competitors.

- a) Do you agree with Bland’s assessment that the US media “spends more time pontificating about morals than

In This Issue



The political changes sweeping across the Arab world this year are both reflected in and helping to change the journalistic landscape in those nations. In *CJR*’s cover story, Lawrence Pintak examines the changes that have come to Arab journalism in recent years, starting with the rise of Al Jazeera’s pro-Arab muckracking and continuing through the rise of critical satellite news coverage during the recent democratic uprisings.

Elsewhere in this issue, Archie Bland investigates the British tabloid *News of the World*’s spreading voicemail-hacking scandal, and what its revelations mean for citizens’ right to privacy at the hands of the media; John Sullivan looks at how public relations firms are taking advantage of journalists’ need for copy on a reduced budget; Pamela Newkirk explores the exodus of African-American journalists from mainstream newspapers; and Tara McKelvey evaluates coverage of the CIA’s clandestine Predator drone attacks in Pakistan.

getting stories and making them interesting to readers”? Where do you draw the line between making reporting interesting and sensationalism?

- b) As a journalist, would you ever break the law to obtain information for stories that could not be written by any other means? Would it matter whether it was information of vital public importance, or just a juicy scoop that would help your publication gain readers?
- c) If British tabloid journalists really do follow the credo “dog doesn’t eat dog,” how can news get out about issues they choose to ignore?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: d) Read some of the Guardian’s extensive coverage of the News of the World phone-hacking scandal (www.guardian.co.uk/media/phone-hacking). Do you agree with Roger Alton that now that guilty parties have been punished, the story no longer merits attention?

3. TRUE ENOUGH (pp. 34–39): In an age of diminished journalistic resources, public relations agencies are gaining ever greater sway over what appears in the news.

- a) Is the increasing role of PR no longer a problem if the source is clearly identified, either by the agency itself or by reporters? Or is any incursion into the newsroom by paid opinion-makers a matter of concern?
- b) Do you agree with Gary McCormick’s assessment that PR agencies don’t lie, because it’s too easy for them to get caught at it? Does Hill & Knowlton’s 1990 use of the Kuwaiti ambassador’s daughter, posing as an unidentified Kuwaiti to testify about the Iraqi invasion of that country, indicate otherwise, or does the subsequent exposure of the hoax indicate the riskiness of that strategy?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) Run the same check on today’s edition of your local newspaper that the Pew Center did on The Baltimore Sun, listing stories generated by the government, by interest groups or public relations, and by reporters. How does it rate compared to the Sun? In how many cases can you not tell where the story originated?

d) Read James Rainey’s column on paid product spokespeople appearing on TV news shows (lat.ms/cjr-rainey). Write a 700-word op-ed proposing one solution to the problems raised by this practice.

4. COVERING OBAMA’S SECRET WAR (pp. 44–47): Predator drone attacks on targets in Pakistan have stepped up under the Obama administration. How can the media report on a war that’s largely impossible to cover first-hand?

- a) How many members of your class had heard about the Predator attacks, and where did they learn about it? Did reading McKelvey’s article change their opinion of the CIA’s use of drones in Pakistan? Should this be reported on more broadly in the media?
- b) What do you think journalists should do when the White House offers to discuss drone operations in order to promote its military strategy? Is it worth the risk that coverage will be skewed by a one-sided source, or is any information better than none?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) Read Jane Mayer’s article in The New Yorker on the Predator drone bombings (nyr.kr/cjr-mayer). What sources does she use to report on the topic? Should other media outlets be doing similar stories?

d) Use Google and Nexis to research how—or whether—US and international news outlets covered the December protests in Islamabad over the killing of Karim Khan’s family members. What conclusions can you draw from comparing different nations’ coverage?

Quick Takes

Read these short articles in class and discuss:

- 1) **Tide Change at Bay Journal (p. 10):** Do you think it compromises the Bay Journal’s credibility to take funding from the EPA even as it covers the agency? Would reducing the amount of EPA funding from its current 70 percent of the paper’s budget mitigate this problem? How much government funding, in your eyes, is too much?
- 2) **Darts & Laurels (p. 13):** Does The Oregonian owning up to its mistakes make up for its reporting of flawed figures about sex trafficking in Portland? When you see a newspaper retracting its own reporting based on further investigation, does it make you think the paper is more reliable, or less?
- 3) **The Family Owner Rises Again (pp. 17–18):** Can traditional newspapers continue to thrive in local markets? How do you think local news sites like AOL’s Patch network will affect family-owned papers?
- 4) **Pay Up (p. 55):** Could paying sources for data encourage private citizens to compile dossiers on each other in hopes of cashing in? Do the allegations that British tabloids are paying freelancers for information—possibly by questionable means (see p. 33)—affect your conclusion?