

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. FREE EXPRESSION AND INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM IN A DIGITAL WORLD (pp. 17–30):

Dispatches from Russia, China, Syria, Yemen, and the US on the challenges facing the next generation of journalism.

- a) If Ekho Moskvyy's editors think that Alexey Navalny is a dangerous nationalist, why do they feature him so much in their coverage? Is it important for opposition news outlets to feature voices that don't appear in other media, regardless of what they think of them? If you were an editor, how would you best determine which opposition voices are most important?
- b) How important is international attention to helping protect stations like Ekho Moskvyy? How could such attention be strengthened?
- c) Do you agree that government-controlled TV can be freer because it doesn't have to be as concerned with ratings, as Zakka Jacob suggests? What's the evidence from commercial and non-commercial outlets in the US and elsewhere? Are any stations truly immune from the pressure of ratings?
- d) What do you think of Walid Al-Saqaf's development of software to get around Internet censorship in Yemen and other Arab nations? When should journalists violate or evade a nation's laws that run counter to free reporting and free expression?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: e) Watch several of CCTV News' items on the network's website (english.cntv.cn). Can you tell from its coverage that it's trying to promote Chinese government interests? Do you see any indications that it has a mandate not to "provoke tensions in our society"? What are the differences between it and other government-owned news institutions like BBC and Al Jazeera? Do you think it will be able to compete for viewers with other networks such as CNN, BBC, or Al Jazeera? Could it, at least, drive other networks to improve their coverage of those regions? f) Compare coverage of an important recent world event from CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera English, and CCTV. Which seems the most informative? The most independent? g) Attempt to research a story using the directives laid out by Dan Gillmor:

In This Issue



What journalism will look like in the future may not have yet come into focus, but some of the challenges that face reporters in an electronic age are becoming clear. In this issue, *CJR* features five articles exploring emerging dilemmas across the globe: the struggles of an opposition radio station in Moscow; China's attempts to create its own CNN- and BBC-killer; the damage wrought by a British documentarian who didn't appreciate the need for electronic security when reporting on Syrian dissidents; the first-hand tale of how a journalist used his coding skills to aid the Arab Spring; and the dangers inherent in US corporate control of information.

In addition, Mike Hudson details his two decades of unraveling the subprime lending scandal, and what it taught him about business journalism. And Michael Shapiro examines the rise of the Huffington Post for lessons about networks, the power of celebrity, and journalism in the online age.

Don't talk to sources on the phone, don't use email, and so on. How would this affect the content of your reporting? How would it affect what stories you choose to report? **h)** Read coverage of the Dajaz1.com case (starting with nyti.ms/cjr-dajaz1) and visit the site itself. Do you think the government's action was warranted? Write a 700-word op-ed expressing how you think the government should handle cases of potential copyright infringement online, and what safeguards against improper prosecution should be in place.

2. THE REPORTER WHO SAW IT COMING (pp. 31–33): Mike Hudson recounts the lessons he learned in uncovering the subprime loan scandal.

- a) Read about how Hudson first stumbled upon the growing subprime loan scandal. Is the sort of story that he was covering at the time as likely to receive attention from today's downsized newspapers? If you were a small newspaper editor, how would you decide what resources to put into trying to ferret out big, undiscovered stories?
- b) Would the subprime loan scandal still be considered as important if not for its effect on the greater economy? If it had only affected poor families losing their homes to foreclosure, would it still have been national news? Should it have been?
- c) What value is there to Hudson's approach of talking more to borrowers and low-level bank employees rather than corporate executives and experts? Is this a good strategy for all reporting? Why or why not? Are there reasons why it isn't used by more journalists?
- d) Why do you think that much bond-market coverage focuses on "deadbeat borrowers lying about their income" rather than larger systemic problems? Do you think this reflects a bias on the part of business news readers, reporters, or editors?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: e) Read the business pages for a week, then come up with a problem that is now ongoing but not receiving as much attention as post-mortems of past scandals. Pitch a story or op-ed on the topic to a local, national, or online news outlet. What arguments can you use to convince editors that this story is worth investigating, even though a scandal isn't immediately clear?

3. SIX DEGREES OF AGGREGATION (pp. 36–47): The Huffington Post has grown from a little-respected celebrity-driven news aggregator to a Pulitzer-winning media giant. How did it get here, and what are the lessons for other online news portals?

- a) Discuss Jonah Peretti's story of his campaign to get Nike sneakers emblazoned with the word "Sweatshop" and how it went viral. How has the dissemination of information like this changed thanks to electronic communication? Has it also changed the content of which stories take on lives of their own? Could Peretti's story have become well-known if traditional media like the San Jose *Mercury News* hadn't devoted attention to it? Would the same be true today?
- b) Could a startup like Huffington Post be created today? Would as many people want to provide free content in an era when anyone can be heard via Twitter?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) Spend an hour visiting huffingtonpost.com. What about it would make you want to come back? Do you think that it succeeds in being "both viral and sticky"? What elements would you like to see other news sites adopt? Would doing so change the content of their reporting?

Quick Takes

Read these short articles in class and discuss:

- 1) **Aggregated Assault (p. 4):** What should the criterion be for acceptable quoting or rehashing of another site's reporting? Are current fair use rules sufficient for the digital age, or should another criterion – say, whether readers are sufficiently motivated to click through to the original site – be the gauge? Would you be likely to click on "Curator's Code" symbols, even if they were routinely used?
- 2) **RealRural (pp. 12–13):** Does the story that Lisa Hamilton tells about the Roquemore family come through in the photo? How else might you have chosen to shoot it?
- 3) **An Unflinching Witness (pp. 15–16):** Where would you draw the line on what risks are worth taking in order to report on a war? How about the risks taken by those who support journalists? How should these be determined?
- 4) **Postage Due (pp. 34–35):** How would it affect you if the US Postal Service were to shut down or severely raise rates and curtail delivery service? If you were running a publication that relied on postal delivery to get to readers, how would you respond in that situation? Brainstorm possible options with your class. What would be the consequences of each of them, for reporters, readers, and journalism itself?