

# 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. AN INK-STAINED WRETCH (pp. 16–18):** Aaron Kushner is gambling that he can get the *Orange County Register* to turn a profit by betting big on quality journalism.

- a) How often do you and your classmates read print newspapers? How much do you think this can be attributed to declining quality, and how much to the ease of news access via the Internet?
- b) Do you pay for any newspaper subscriptions, whether in print or online? Would you be willing to pay for a newspaper along the lines of what Aaron Kushner is trying to create at the *Orange County Register*? How much?
- c) What does Ken Doctor's conclusion that increased subscription revenues could offset the cost of new newsroom hires imply about the effect of the reverse: cutting payroll to reduce costs? Do newsroom cuts really help newspapers make (or lose less) money? Are there other reasons why publishing companies might be pursuing aggressive layoffs?

**BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: d)** Research the history of the *Register's* ownership. If ownership's main problem was its high level of debt, was the *Register* actually suffering from a crisis of its business model, or merely of management that borrowed too freely against the paper's assets?

**2. STICKING WITH THE TRUTH (pp. 19–21):** The myth that modern vaccines cause autism was kept alive by news outlets' obsession with "balance" over science.

- a) How should journalists go about determining when

## In This Issue



As the journalism industry struggles to find a new business model, it faces one inescapable reality: Readers, especially young readers, are increasingly turning away from traditional forms of media to bite-sized nuggets that can be consumed via phone or social media. In this issue of *CJR*, Ben Adler explores how news outlets are responding to the demands of the new media landscape, from embracing Tumblr, YouTube, and other social media sites, to personalizing the editors who are curating their news coverage, to rethinking entirely what it means to attract readers in an age when most people don't sit down to read a single newspaper or website.

Also in this issue, Ryan Chittum profiles Aaron Kushner's gamble on quality journalism as a way to attract new subscribers to the *Orange County Register*. Curtis Brainard examines how overly "balanced" media coverage helped perpetuate the myth that vaccines cause autism, long after scientists had determined this to be false. Sara Morrison recounts the final days of Jessica Lum, who chose to dedicate her final days before her death from cancer to the practice of journalism. And Jeffrey Robinson recounts the legacy of the *International Herald Tribune*, which is being replaced by *The Global Edition of The New York Times*.

scientific consensus is wrong? Or should they not even try to, and just report on what most scientists are saying? Are there examples of situations where the majority of scientists were later proven wrong? Do journalists have any responsibility to try to identify situations where the scientific consensus may be erroneous?

- b) If Dan Burton’s congressional hearings helped spark the wave of vaccine-scare coverage, does this indicate anything about the media’s propensity to cover what elected officials are saying above what scientists or other experts think? How has this played into coverage of other scientific issues, such as climate change?

**BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c)** Look up several major media articles from the past ten years on the alleged vaccine-autism link. How much do they attempt to “balance” the majority scientific opinion with dissenting views, and who provides them? Do they attempt to distinguish between vaccines that include thimerisol and those that don’t? Overall, how well do you think they convey the science behind the story? Which of them are best, and which worst?

**3. STREAMS OF CONSCIOUSNESS (pp. 25–36):** How can journalism outlets attract readers from a generation used to getting their news from social media?

- a) Break into small groups, go through this article, and underline each instance when a digital media expert puts forward an idea on how to approach young readers. Which of these do you think accurately reflects the habits of you and your classmates? To what degree is their advice actual learned wisdom, and to what degree mere hype?
- b) How much do front pages of websites matter anymore? What role do front pages play in print journalism? What are the pros and cons of having editors determine what the most important news of the day is? How do you and your classmates determine which stories to follow on any given day?
- c) Do you agree that social media make your readership choices more “outward-looking”? Is this necessarily good or bad? Is this any different from older readers choosing which newspapers to read based on which ones they’re willing to be seen reading?
- d) Do you feel you “have little or no trust in the mass media to report the news fully, accurately, and fairly,” as 60 percent of Americans say they do? Is this a sign that the media have failed to gain the trust of their readers, or that readers are able to see through the too-frequent inaccuracies of the media?
- e) Do you find social media to be more trustworthy than regular media? How much of the information you receive via social media is specific to that medium, and how much is links to traditional media?
- f) Ask your classmates: Do they agree that they’d sooner spread good news than bad news for fear of being labeled a downer? If so, what exceptions can they think of to this rule? If not, could bad news be more of a turnoff for advertisers than for readers?

**BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: g)** Pick three local newspapers or news sites and read the top stories of the day. How many of them succeed in getting the lede into their headlines? Would these make you more likely to click on the articles in question? More likely to tweet them? Does it make them more informative articles? **h)** Read the Upworthy chart with the headline “The Real Reason They Still Play ‘Mrs. Robinson’ on the Radio” (<http://bit.ly/mrs-robinson-radio>). Find another article or chart on a complex topic important to you and come up with a headline and lede that would similarly provide a good hook for readers. What are some ways to come up with grabby headlines without detracting from the content of the story itself? Are there any ways you would improve the headline or content of the Upworthy piece to make it more effective?

## Quick Takes

Read these short articles in class and discuss:

- 1) **Opening Shot (p. 3):** Do you think it was appropriate to create the “What Twitter will look like on the day that Thatcher dies” pie chart at a time when Margaret Thatcher was ill? Was it appropriate to retweet it after Thatcher had actually died? How should news outlets report on the deaths on public figures who are revered by some and reviled by others? Should the recently deceased be off limits for criticism, or should the public record reflect both the good and bad of their lives?
- 2) **Empty calories (p. 4):** Do you agree with the editorial’s contention that someday soon “there will be very little credible news for the bloggers and scrapers to aggregate,” given increasing numbers of paywalls? How hard is it for aggregators to get around paywalls? Does it make it more or less likely for you to read aggregated articles when the original is behind a paywall?
- 3) **It doesn’t add up (pp. 54–55):** Discuss as a class: What have you read and heard about the US shortage of STEM workers? Do you think that the media coverage has been misleading on this topic? If so, what are some possible reasons why?