

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

Opening Shot



MOVING DAY FOR DAMIEN DENEIR AND HIS GRANDMOTHER, KIM. Casualties of the subprime loan crisis, they are shown leaving their home near Denver in April. What has been your primary source of news on the country's financial meltdown? Who do you think has offered the best coverage of the issue? The worst? Why? Imagine you were a reporter assigned to cover the DeNeirs' eviction. How would you do it in a way that not only informs your readers of what they need to know about the DeNeirs and the larger issues surrounding their eviction but also encourages readers to care.

OVERLOAD, PP. 30-42: Why is the Web like catnip for so many people, and journalists in particular? Is information overload a problem? What would be a good indication that you are suffering from information overload? Are you? What are the benefits and drawbacks of having so much information at our fingertips? According to the study cited on top of page 32, despite all the additional information that is now available, the public is no better informed than it was in 1940s. Assuming the study is correct, why do you think that's the case? Since the study also indicates that the public isn't as well-informed as it should be, what could be done to increase public awareness about important issues? The author, Bree Nordenson, suggests that news organizations "need to reevaluate their role in the information landscape and reinvent themselves to better serve their consumers." How could they do that? Nordenson also cites one expert who says, "We tend to define productivity in terms of speed and volume rather than

Talking Points

IN THIS ISSUE, CJR looks at how we can become overloaded, not following copious portions of turkey at Thanksgiving dinner, but after the brain has dined on too much information.

It might seem counterintuitive that there could be too much information available at our fingertips, but as our cover story shows, overload can be a genuine problem for reporters and our society as a whole. Take the picture on the left, for example. It took a long time for many members of the press to connect the dots from predatory lending to the financial crisis to the very personal dramas of people losing their homes. A major reason why was the blizzard of information reporters had to clear their way through before the complete picture could emerge.

Think about the amount of information directed at you on an average day from the time you wake up in the morning until your turn off your radio, television, or computer at night. Now, do you get the picture?

At what point does your brain start behaving like a sponge that has soaked up too much water? Is there anything you can do to prevent yourself from gorging on too information or do journalists need to form a new organization: Overloaders Anonymous? Do we have to do a Google search to find out?

To get CJR into your students' hands through low-cost subscriptions, contact Dennis Giza at dfg2@columbia.edu.

quality of thought and ideas.” Why do we do that? What could journalists do to help change this attitude toward productivity? Is it part of a journalist’s job to do so? Do you agree with those who say that people who use the Web as their prime source of news generally seek out news that supports their own points of view? Why or why not? Even if it is partly true, how does it change the way our society works? **ADDITIONAL**

ACTIVITIES: Log your use of the Web over two days. Also, note how you read Web sites. Do you read them in the manner that Jakob Nielsen suggests most people do (p. 33)? Why or not? Analyze your log and write a report explaining its implications about your reading habits. Does it indicate you are taking in too much information? As a class, create a guide to the Web that would help journalists find what they need to know to do their jobs well without being overloaded with too much information.

ATRISK IN MEXICO, PP. 43-45: What would you do if you were facing the same kinds of threats as those described by the journalists in this story? What, if anything, could the Mexican government do to protect the lives of reporters investigating the drug cartels? Is there a way to continue covering these issues while also minimizing the danger the journalists face? Go online and read some of the recent reports published by the Committee to Protect Journalist. What do they indicate about the dangers faced by journalists worldwide? Do the reports

Between the Lines

- 1) After reading “Drawing Lines,” (p. 4) do you think newspapers or other media should hire political operatives as editorialists or commentators? Why or why not?
- 2) How would you judge the media’s treatment of Sarah Palin during the presidential? Support your argument with selections from the coverage.
- 3) If you were the medical editor of a newspaper and were handed a press release about the results of a new study that was funded by a pharmaceutical company, what would you do with it?
- 4) Should journalists be marketed like rock musicians (p. 18)? Why or why not? Would you like to be?
- 5) What are the advantages and disadvantages of working for a unionized newsroom? Which would you prefer? Why?

discourage you from doing potentially dangerous journalism? Why or why not?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES: Go

online and find any Web sites or blogs that cover news on Mexico’s drug cartels. Who are the sources of the stories? How well are English-speaking readers being made aware of the problem? Find examples of any journalism that makes the connection between the Mexican cartels and drug abuse in the United States? What do the stories that you found teach you about how to do quality reporting?

MURROW’S BOY, PP. 46-51: What do you think motivates Dan Rather to continue in the news business after being fired by CBS? Does HDNet sound like place where you would like to work? Why or why not? What are the advantages and disadvantages of working for HDNet’s news programs? The article mentions Rather’s contentious interview with George H. W. Bush (excerpts can be found on YouTube). Was Rather wrong to press Bush? What does it say about the state of journalism that tough questioning of presidents or candidates for president (and vice president) are often frowned upon? Should there be a larger place on the broadcast schedule for “tough journalism” and documentaries? How has corporate ownership of the networks elevated or lowered the importance of their news division? How

has that in turn affected our politics and culture? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Rather says his firing was motivated by CBS’s desire to curry favor in Washington. Find out if his charge has merit. Research the story of President Bush and the National Guard. If you can, watch a broadcast of it and critique it based on any additional research you have done. Did Rather get the story right, or were those who criticized it correct? Explain your verdict in an essay. Watch several of Rather’s HDNet broadcasts and critique them in comparison with the fare offered up by the major networks. Find out more about the life and work of Edward R. Murrow. What were the highlights of his career? Why did he eventually leave CBS (and what parallels can you draw to Rather’s departure)? Why is Murrow still so revered more than forty years after his death? Assess his impact on television news and on the American political landscape. Find video of Murrow and discuss what you’ve learned from his work. Who were “Murrow’s Boys”? What did they do that made them so highly respected?

Quick Takes

- 1) After reading “Music Lessons” (p. 18), imagine you are two people occupying two slots — the head of public relations and a reporter — at a newspaper or television station. Create a campaign that would market you as a brand.
- 2) “Music Lessons” also mentions several Web sites that are “little doors to the future of media.” Create a guide to cutting-edge, online journalism sites with a line or two accompanying each entry, explaining its value.
- 3) Read “False Readings” (p. 22), and then seek out five articles by different journalists on the Gross Domestic Product. Critique them in light of Jonathan Rowe’s comments.