

# 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. THE RISE OF TRUE FICTION (pp. 20–22):** New books and films like *The Hurt Locker* blur the lines between invention and reporting.

- a) The graphic book *A.D.* is described by the *New York Times* as “a novel, not a documentary,” in part because its author “edited parts of the survivors’ stories.” All news stories leave something out; at what point do you think editing crosses the line to fictionalization?
- b) Many novelists engage in extensive research into the subject areas of their fictional works before writing them. Does a well-researched work of fiction like *The Wire* qualify as journalism? Or does the label even matter?

**BEYOND THE CLASSROOM:** c) Select a recent news feature from the newspaper and rewrite it as “true fiction.” Is the result more gripping to readers? How much license do you feel comfortable taking with the facts of the story? d) Write proposed ground rules for a newspaper or book publisher to ensure that “true fiction” remains accurate, even if it fictionalizes some of the details. If “emotional truth” is the goal, how should that be defined?

**2. THE RECONSTRUCTION OF AMERICAN JOURNALISM (pp. 28–55):** An overview and discussion of proposals for securing the future of “accountability journalism.”

- a) The authors write that reporting the news “undergirds democracy by explaining complicated events, issues, and processes in clear language.” Are bloggers now performing this role? Are professional journalists more needed for reporting the news, explaining it, or both?
- b) During Hurricane Katrina, what news sources did you follow? Which was the most affecting? How would your perception of events have changed if there had been fewer newspapers reporting, and more amateur bloggers and citizen journalists?

## In This Issue



As the news media’s financial woes have deepened, the search is on for potential solutions: What will the journalism world of the future look like, and how can we get there? And, perhaps most important, how can we assure the survival of the kind of reporting that investigates and holds accountable our political and business leaders?

In this special issue of *CJR*, Leonard Downie Jr. and Michael Schudson assess the proposals and ongoing experiments in remaking journalism for the future, from new investigative Web sites and “citizen journalism” to university-based news outlets to new funding ideas including changes in both newspapers’ tax status and how the Corporation for Public Broadcasting allocates its funds. Following that, four veteran journalists respond to Downie and Schudson, noting the pitfalls of some of these approaches, and suggesting some ideas of their own. If all the answers aren’t yet clear, it’s the kind of debate that’s necessary in order to keep journalism vital as it moves forward in the 21st century.

- c) Poll your classmates and compile a list of what sections of a newspaper's Web site they would pay for access to, and how much they would pay. Is the per-person total enough to fund a newspaper? Do you think it would affect what newspapers cover if, say, football fans were paying a disproportionate share of the bills, or would editors use that money to fund worthwhile "accountability" projects?
- d) Does NPR seem like a good funding model for other news organizations? What are some of the potential downsides of relying on individual donors and foundations?
- e) If laid-off journalists are subsidizing their blogs with their other freelance work, is this a viable model for the future? Would you write for free, supported by your day job? How would it affect your reporting?
- f) Josh Marshall says of Talking Points Memo, "We're not trying to be completely impartial but fair and rigorously honest." Can a site be partisan yet honest? Where would you draw the line if, say, choosing how to report a scandal involving a politician you support, or oppose?
- g) How would you institute government grants to journalism? What criteria would you use for grants, and how would you ensure "strict safeguards" were maintained against political pressure? Would "aggregators" be eligible as well, and if not, how would you rule them out? What about bloggers? Political advocacy sites?
- h) If direct government subsidies in Europe have not had a noticeable "chilling effect" as the authors say, should they be considered in the U.S.?

**BEYOND THE CLASSROOM:** **i)** Research the history of the FCC's public-service requirement for broadcast licenses. Would you be in favor of re-establishing enforcement of these rules, and how would you improve them? **j)** Contact bloggers who write for local sites like the New Haven Independent or the New West network, and ask what they gain from the experience. Do they benefit from working in collaboration with professional journalists, or are they just in it for the exposure? **k)** Compare the coverage of a local news story in your community by a big daily paper, and by a small neighborhood newspaper or blog. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each? Write an analysis of what each could learn from the other. **l)** Contact a reporter or editor for the CBC or BBC (or their companion websites) and ask if they feel constrained by receiving government funding for their organizations. Would they advocate such a funding model for the United States? **m)** Out of all the ideas presented in this article and its responses, select one or two that you think is best equipped to secure the future of quality journalism. Write a 500-word op-ed advocating your choice.

**3. A FAILURE OF SKEPTICISM (pp. 57–61):** B.G. Burkett works to debunk what he considers smears of Vietnam vets.

- a) How do you think revelations like Burkett's affect the general public's trust in the news media? If news outlets devoted more time and money to fact-checking, would they be repaid in increased reader loyalty?
- b) According to [mediamatters.org](http://mediamatters.org), Burkett asserted during John Kerry's presidential campaign that Kerry had called Vietnam veterans "murderers and rapists," something Media Matters says it investigated and found to be untrue. Should both supporters and critics of Burkett have been included in this article?

**BEYOND THE CLASSROOM:** **c)** Contact journalists who've written about veterans and ask whether and how they fact-check their subjects' stories. What, if anything, do you think they should be doing differently? **d)** Russell Working's story itself contains several paragraphs about B.G. Burkett's life and military record. Attempt to check these facts. How accurate are they, and how long did it take to confirm or deny them?

## Quick Takes

Read these short articles in class and discuss:

- 1) **Man on the (Digital) Street (pp. 10–11):** Would you consider using the Help A Reporter Out service, and if so, for what kinds of stories? How would you make sure those you found via the site were representative of the type of person you were looking to interview?
- 2) **Freeze Frame (p. 12):** Do you think there should be limits on restricting photography in certain places? Should public agencies like D.C. Metro have different standards than a private non-profit like Monticello?
- 3) **Darts & Laurels (p. 15):** How do you think the STO story remained unreported on for 12 years, even as it was an "open secret" among private-school parents? How would the story's impact have been different if it had been broken by a special-interest blog, rather than a general-interest newspaper?
- 4) **Mourning Becomes Electric (p. 71):** What news events of recent years do you think have cut through people's "separate universes" and brought them together? Is shared tragedy the common thread, or does something else characterize them?