

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. REBOOT (pp. 28–34): How the FCC could rewrite media regulations to aid the future of journalism.

- a) Does Jeff Jarvis' observation that journalism can only be sustainable "if it is profitable" imply that the profit motive is the best motivator for quality reporting? Or could nonprofit news sites also thrive in a world where they could at least break even?
- b) Should the FCC try to increase the diversity of print and broadcast outlets, not just their health?
- c) What do you think of the National Association of Broadcasters' argument that they donate \$7 billion worth of airtime to public service announcements to fulfill their public interest obligation? Would that money be better spent elsewhere?
- d) Does the fact that total newspaper readers, including the web audience, has grown since 2000 suggest that the price of journalism has become what economists call an "externality," a social cost (like cleaning up pollution) that can't easily be assigned to individual consumers? Does this imply that the government should be spending money directly on journalism, as it does when cleaning up toxic spills?
- e) Do you agree that corporate ad dollars are morally equivalent to government dollars? Why or why not?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: f) Write a letter to FCC adviser Steven Waldman itemizing your own suggestions for reform. What priorities do you think the FCC should have in its programs: building public media, providing private media, both, or something else entirely? What requirements, if any, would you impose on broadcasters as part of their "public interest obligations"? Indicate how—or whether—you would ensure that any public investments in media are "content neutral" and avoid political bias.

2. THE RECORD KEEPER (pp. 35–40): The trials of covering U.S. military tribunals at Guantánamo Bay.

- a) Should the news media do more reporting of the restrictions placed on journalists at Guantánamo, even at the risk of angering their hosts? Where should news outlets draw the line between providing readers with needed context and not wanting to "become the story"?

In This Issue



In *CJR's* cover story this issue, Steve Coll tackles the contentious issue of the Federal Communications Commission's oversight of broadcast media. Could the FCC, asks Coll, be better using its powers to help keep quality journalism alive?

The question of how to preserve quality journalism is threaded throughout this issue: Carol Rosenberg's battles with military censors at Guantánamo Bay; the new world of algorithm-driven story topics being ushered in by AOL and Demand Media; and how Chinese bloggers are filling the gap in political reporting left by the government's tight control of the official media. Even if the winners are still uncertain, the battles are raging on.

- b) What lessons can other journalists draw from Carol Rosenberg's experience finding sources in Guantánamo? Should reporters spend more time cultivating relationships with low-level staff instead of attending press briefings, or is this a special situation?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) Read some of Carol Rosenberg's dispatches from Guantánamo at miamiherald.com/guantanamo. Do they hold any broader lessons about the ability to convey in short-form articles as much depth as a long magazine article would?

3. CHINA'S CHESS MATCH (pp. 41–45): Chinese “netizens” are reporting their own news via the web.

- a) Does the Chinese government's willingness to back down in the Sun Zhigang and Deng Yujiao cases indicate that public pressure can be effective even in an undemocratic system? Which is more important to democracy: free elections, or government accountability?
- b) Is the strength of China's “citizen journalist” movement in spite of, or because of the government's tight control of the press? Is it easier for independent bloggers to find an audience in a nation where the only competition is the official media?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) Write a 700-word op-ed making the case for the argument of one of the three China experts in the article's conclusion: Zheng, MacKinnon, or Qiang.

4. AOL AND THE ALGORITHM (pp. 46–50): An online giant is hiring hundreds of journalists to write articles assigned based in part on search algorithms.

- a) Are journalists more “successful” when they write about what people are interested in? What's the proper balance between writing what your readers want to know, and what they need to know? How do your own online search topics compare to what you want from a news site?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: b) Research the “most popular searches” on various search engines. Can this provide a good template for what readers want? **c)** Visit one of Patch.com's local sites, and write a brief analysis of both the topics covered and the quality of the reporting. Do you agree with Anderson's contention that it's “competent if no-frills”? How much of it is “scraped” from other news sites, and what is gained and lost in that process?

5. IN DEMAND (pp. 51–53): A veteran journalist enters the brave new world of “commercial content.”

- a) Do you agree with Lunzer that Demand Media “spells the end of what we consider journalism”? Or is it a separate entity that doesn't really compete with journalism, more akin to self-help books or advice columns?
- b) What do you think of the argument that news organizations can use the money saved by relying on companies like Demand for some content to hire more real reporters? What would it take to ensure that this is so?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) Select one of the Demand topics mentioned by Spangler, and research and write a short report answering the question. How long did it take you? What corners would you have to cut to ensure a living wage at this rate?

Quick Takes

Read these short articles in class and discuss:

- 1) The Future of Journalism (p. 10–11):** How much does the success of the Narrative Science software tell us about the use of algorithms in crafting news stories, and how much about the state of typical game-day sportswriting? What kinds of reporting would be the easiest to replace with an automated system, and what kinds the most difficult? If local newspapers are struggling, how would you ensure they used the money saved by not employing sportswriters to hire additional writers in other sections?
- 2) Lost Links (p. 11):** If you've had articles published, have you saved them yourself, and how? Should copyright laws be adjusted to allow for personal web archiving of material that might otherwise disappear? Can sites like archive.org's Wayback Machine, which maintains a database of vanished web pages from the past, help fill this gap?
- 3) A Faustian Bargain (pp. 16–18):** When you look at slideshows, do you scroll through them because you “want to know more about what you already know,” or because they're easier to “channel-surf” than other web features? Does the fact that each item in a slideshow counts as a separate click call into question the validity of web hit stats? And is it likely that more advanced metrics, such as tracking “engagement” to see how much time readers spend with an ad, will ultimately kill the slideshow as an ad revenue cash cow?
- 4) Disclose This (pp. 21–22):** Are there other fields where you'd like to see fuller disclosure of sources' funding ties? How much responsibility do journalists have to investigate the background of each source before citing them?