

# 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. GOING TO GREAT LENGTHS (pp. 16–17):** The rise of the e-singles market raises questions about the book form's future.

- a) Discuss with your classmates: Do you read e-singles? Is so, why? If not, why not? What would it take to get you to read more?
- b) Would you pay for a subscription to published works by a site like The Atavist? How does this differ from a traditional magazine model, both for writers and for readers?
- c) How much would you reasonably pay for an e-single? What would you expect to get in return? What would get you to pay a higher sticker price, such as \$5 or more?

**BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: d)** Read the lists of best-selling e-singles. What types of works sell best? Is there a danger that authors will only publish on these kinds of topics, and steer clear of less sexy subjects that might also deserve attention? Is that a problem with the traditional book market as well? **e)** Are there any topics that you would consider writing an e-single about? What obstacles would you see in gaining readership for them? Do any of the new approaches discussed in this article seem like they would help?

**2. QUESTIONABLE TASTE (pp. 20–21):** Ricky Gervais discusses the art of celebrity interviews, from the interviewee's perspective.

- a) Why do you think that entertainment journalists ask questions like "What three items would you save from a fire?" Do readers like them? Or are they just an easy way to get unique answers from a subject who's likely being interviewed by other

## In This Issue



A large portion of the news business is dedicated to covering the output of the entertainment industry, from movies to TV. Accordingly, this issue of *CJR* is devoted to exploring the ins and outs of reporting on Hollywood, and how to navigate the world of celebrity coverage and emerge with both readership and journalistic ethics intact.

Starting off the issue, *CJR* editor Cyndi Stivers interviews outspoken actor/director Ricky Gervais about the strange phenomenon of the press junket, and how he approaches the inevitable flood of interviews they require. Next, Douglas McCollum digs into the celebrity interview that started them all: Truman Capote's 1957 exposure of Marlin Brando for the *New Yorker* that changed the game when it came to Hollywood profiles. Reid Rosefelt gives the inside scoop on the life of a movie publicist. Edward Jay Epstein shows how news reporting on the movie box-office race misses the mark. Jay A. Fernandez recounts his experience reporting as a movie extra-for-a-day. And Sara Morrison provides a behind-the-scenes peek at the growing world of television recaps.

Also in this issue, Bruce Porter revisits—literally—a troubled teen who he profiled for *Newsweek* 43 years ago, and reflects on whether he crossed the line in writing about her life, both then and now. Plus, we offer our usual assortment of updates from all corners of the journalism world, including a look at the present—and future—of the burgeoning e-singles book market.

outlets at the same time?

- b) Discuss as a class: What celebrity interviewers do you find the most entertaining to watch or read? Why? Are these the same interviewers who you would say are the most informative and enlightening?

**BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c)** Prepare a list of questions that you would ask Ricky Gervais if you had 20 minutes with him for an interview. How did you decide what you hoped to achieve with your interview? How much research did you have to do to feel satisfied that your questions would elicit interesting answers?

**3. IN COLD TYPE (pp. 24–29):** Inside Truman Capote’s 1957 interview of Marlon Brando that changed Hollywood profiles forever.

- a) Should actors be able to keep their private lives private, or is being exposed in public part of the job, as it arguably is for athletes?
- b) Discuss as a class: Would Capote’s recalling of quotes from memory, without notes, be accepted today? Should it have been accepted then? How accurate are quotes in articles usually, even in cases where interviewers do take notes? What’s the greater responsibility of an interviewer: to get down words verbatim, or to get across the subject’s intent? Should writers ever be allowed to “fictionalize” elements in profiles? If so, when?
- c) If you could pull it off, would you consider deceiving an interview subject as Capote admits he did with Brando, by saying at the outset that you were doing an interview but then holding what appears to be just a casual conversation? Would you consider it for some interviews and not others? If so, where would you draw the line?

**BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: d)** Read Capote’s article “The Duke in His Domain.” What do you like about it? Dislike? Is it good journalism? Good literature? Is it fair to its subject? Do you think it succeeds in taking the “low form” of celebrity profiles and making it into high art?

**4. LOST AND FOUND (pp. 45–48):** Bruce Porter revisits a 43-year-old *Newsweek* interview to reconsider whether he violates a source’s trust.

- a) Can you find any justification for Bruce Porter’s decision to violate his source Marcy’s confidentiality? Is there any “saving grace”?
- b) What do you think of Porter’s decision to participate in a film about his search for Marcy? Was it exploitative in its own way? What about writing this article for *CJR*? In general, how should journalists balance their desire to report on people’s real lives while respecting their subjects’ desire for privacy?

**BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c)** Find at least three examples of articles in today’s news media that focus on a particular individual. Do they seem more respectful of their subjects? If so, why? If not, why not?

## Quick Takes

Read these short articles in class and discuss:

- 1) **Opening Shot (p. 3):** What are your first thoughts when you look at this photo of Mitt Romney? Is it irresponsible for news outlets to select photos based on the context in which they show the candidates—or is it irresponsible for them not to show context? How should news outlets go about selecting photos for publication, and how much information should they be expected to provide in captions and other accompanying material?
- 2) **Hard truths (p. 4):** Is the biggest problem with political factchecking that politicians nonetheless find it easy to lie with impunity, or that facts are slippery matters that are too difficult to pin down in a quick factcheck article? Or are these both interrelated dilemmas? As a reader and a reporter, what form of factchecking would you like to see that would be most effective at helping separate fact from fiction in candidates’ statements?
- 3) **Notes from our online readers (p. 8):** What do you think of Ann Friedman’s response to readers who criticized her for suggesting that aspiring writers should consider working for free? Does the willingness of some freelancers to write for free depress the market for writing? Even if it does, is there any way to stop writers desperate for exposure from undercutting their peers?
- 4) **What the NY Times obits say about America (p. 13):** How do you think news outlets should go about deciding who to feature in obituaries? What should make a person’s life “newsworthy”? Is it merely a matter of how well-known they are, or should a major figure in a minor field get equally high billing?
- 5) **Taking the seen-it route (pp. 41–44):** Do you read TV recaps? When, and why? What, if anything, do you think they can add to the appreciation of a TV show when done well?