

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.

To get CJR into your students' hands through low-cost subscriptions, check out the options at http://www.cjr.org/student_subscriptions/ and contact Dennis Giza at dfg2@columbia.edu.

1. TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT? (pp. 24–28): Has military reporter Tom Ricks crossed the line from reporting to advocacy?

- a) How has your perception of the war in Iraq changed since 2007? Would Ricks' closeness to Gen. Petraeus and the new military leadership make you more trusting of his analysis or less?
- b) What was your reaction to learning that Army faculty were afraid to talk to Ricks for fear of angering Donald Rumsfeld? How might that affect coverage, and how can journalists work around it?
- c) Military reporter Carl Prine attacked Ricks as no longer a "traditional reporter" because he had written a "controversial book," started a blog, and taken a job with a think tank. How does that compare with Prine's own decision to take time off from journalism to serve with the National Guard in Iraq? Does journalists' involvement with a story give them more insight into the issues involved, or bias them?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: d) Using LexisNexis or Google News, read Ricks' earlier writing on Iraq war strategy, and compare it to his more recent analysis. Did he change, or did the war? **e)** Ricks says he "could not really do justice to what he had seen [in Iraq] in standard news articles." Read his blog at ricks.foreignpolicy.com, and propose three suggestions for how newspapers could improve the way they cover wars.

2. TAKE A STAND (pp. 32–39): Do the media need to drop "objectivity" to retain their relevance?

- a) If you're going to go behind "the ideas we take for granted," what standards should you use to evaluate the alternate ideas being put forward by less mainstream sources?
- b) How does the desire not to "take sides" influence what sorts of stories get the most coverage in the news me-

In This Issue

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have largely retreated from the front pages, yet the fighting continues, with more than 300 U.S. troops killed in the first eight months of 2009. It's something that ought to concern committed journalists: How we keep a focus on military conflicts even when public attention begins to wane, especially at a time of editorial cutbacks?



In the first of two stories this month on the topic, Tara McKelvey examines the case of Tom Ricks, the former *Washington Post* reporter whose latest book, *The Gamble*, is a forceful advocacy of counterinsurgency techniques — the approach championed by Gen. David Petraeus, the current CENTCOM commander. In the other, Jane Arraf looks at how the U.S. military has become increasingly difficult for reporters to work with, even as journalists' own resources have been strained. Both raise provocative questions about the role of the media in focusing attention on wars and the way they are fought.

In another look at a story that's begun to slip from public view, Curtis Brainard and Cristine Russell suggest that energy coverage, rather than being relegated to the business beat, should incorporate discussion of the environment and global climate change. And Elinore Longobardi delves into the terminology used in reporting on what became known as the "sub-prime" crisis — and how it may have shaped coverage. Finally, Brent Cunningham proposes that the press needs a new mission, and that it can find it in not just reporting the news but in becoming a crusader for reform.

dia? Does this lead to more coverage of crime and political sex scandals instead of complex policy debates?

- c) Do you agree that “part-time journalists” and bloggers can’t do the job of professionals in providing broader analysis? In your own reading, where do you typically go for “sustained coverage of ideas and solutions”?
- d) Is Jack Newfield’s dictum, “Pick an issue. Study it. Make yourself an expert so you won’t make any stupid factual mistakes” still possible in today’s fast-paced, understaffed media environment?
- e) Is the ideal of journalistic “objectivity” worth saving, in part or in whole? How do you see blogs changing the expectations people have that reporters will not wear their biases on their sleeves?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: f) Find another “marginalized” voice along the lines of Bill Mitchell and MIT’s Smart Cities research group. Do they deserve to be heard, and why? Would you feel the need to balance them with an opposing voice? g) Read one newspaper’s coverage of the auto bailout. Email the reporters who covered that beat – why did they use the sources they did? Did they discuss mass transit, and if not, why not? What implications does this have for Cunningham’s call for more crusading public-service journalism?

3. THE NEW ENERGY BEAT (pp. 32–39): Recasting energy coverage to bridge the gap between the environment and the business world.

- a) Have global warming and the environment moved down the list of your concerns in recent years? If so, why? Do you think reduced media coverage is driving lack of interest, or just reflecting people’s other concerns?
- b) What do you find the most compelling reason for energy reform: economic growth, national security, saving the planet? Do you think journalists should be looking for ways to make issues “pop”?
- c) Why do you think, as John Fialka says, there are more reporters who reduce things to politics than who can explain economics and science? Is this connected to reporters’ reluctance to “take sides”?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: d) Eric Pooley of Harvard’s Shorenstein Center has suggested newspapers start a “climate beat” rather than an “energy beat.” Write a short op-ed advocating one approach over the other. e) Write a pitch for a newspaper series on energy policy. How would you make it concrete enough for readers to relate to while still conveying both the economic and the environmental effects? f) Look at Oregon Public Broadcasting’s “The Switch” series, the Des Moines Register’s “Green Fields” blog, and the New York Times’ “Dot Earth” blog. Which does the best at getting the big picture? Write a letter to one paper’s editor suggesting ways for the paper to improve its coverage.

4. HOW “SUBPRIME” KILLED “PREDATORY” (pp. 45–49): Did the language of the loan crisis skew coverage?

- a) When did you first understand that the problem was not high-risk borrowers getting loans, but the kinds of loans they were getting? Do you think the use of “subprime” aided or harmed that understanding?
- b) Think of other issues where the terminology used varies according to the speaker’s political position. What criteria do you think journalists should use for choosing which terms to use?
- c) Longobardi criticizes the press for “[taking] its cues from those in power” in not focusing on predatory lendings since 2004. But didn’t they previously follow the lead of attorney generals in covering predatory loans? As a reporter or editor, how would you avoid being unduly influenced by the current political leadership?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: d) Read a recent news story on the subprime crisis. Does it include any history of predatory lending, such as redlining, as Longobardi suggests? How would you improve the article to provide more context? e) Search LexisNexis or Google News for articles mentioning “predatory lending.” Do these give you a better understanding of the housing loan crisis, or could they be improved as well?

Quick Takes

Read these short articles in class and discuss:

- 1) **Darts & Laurels (p. 13):** Do you agree with Marx’s contention that the Hartford Courant should have removed the story from its Web site? Debate the issue as a class, with different groups of students taking on different roles (the police, the Courant editor and reporter, family members of the hostage, Courant readers).
- 2) **Great Expectations (pp. 17–18):** Do you think PBS and NPR are good models for an Investigative News Network? Would that include getting government funding, as those outlets do? How would you accommodate the startup publishers’ concern that having a central network could siphon off funding and attention from the needs of local outlets?
- 3) **A Luddite’s Virtual Book Tour (pp. 19–20):** Of the last five books you read, where did you hear about them: traditional media, blogs, or somewhere else? If you were a book author, what methods would you use to try to draw readers?