

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 HAMSTER WHEEL (pp. 24–28): Instead of “doing more with less,” should newspapers focus on doing better?

- a) As news consumers, how much do you value quality vs. quantity? How do the news outlets you frequent the most choose to prioritize their time and resources?
- b) Do you think Starkman's argument that papers will lose “credibility and value over the long term” can sway publishers, even if online ad dollars are based solely on short-term eyeballs?
- c) Starkman argues that “new financial models of digital journalism are still being worked out.” Can you picture a model that would encourage good reporting instead of the “hamster wheel”?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: d) Read BusinessWeek's recent article about Henry Blodget's growing blog empire (bit.ly/cjr-blodget) and the Financial Times' coverage of Demand Media (bit.ly/cjr-demand). What do these indicate about whether there's money in “Microwave Sparks Fire, Kills Dog” stories? Can quality journalism thrive alongside sites set up to maximize hit counts?

2. A ROCKET'S TRAJECTORY (pp. 29–37): An examination of Marcus Brauchli's controversial reign at the top of *The Washington Post*.

- a) Do you think Sherman's argument that Brauchli and Weymouth might only be “remembered as cost-cutters and bureaucrats” is fair?
- b) Given that Katharine Weymouth said she wanted someone who could “effect change either in our structure or our headcount,” is Brauchli just doing

In This Issue



The future of news is, most analysts predict, one of doing more with less: more content, more of it multimedia, all generated by fewer staff with fewer resources. But what will that look like, and what are the likely casualties?

In *CJR's* cover story this issue, Dean Starkman looks at what he calls “the hamster wheel”: the neverending drive to increase the quantity of news being churned out by today's downsized newsrooms. It's a trap, he says, that will only damage journalism in the long run: Quantity may drive clicks, but it's quality reporting that creates a dedicated readership.

Also in this issue: Scott Sherman's profile of Marcus Brauchli, the veteran *Wall Street Journal* reporter who has made waves during his two-year tenure as the top editor at *The Washington Post*. And Jill Drew makes an impassioned plea for news sites not to give up on video journalism, which she says remains a powerful form of storytelling—if only Web users could find it.

With journalism at a crossroads, such questions are more important than ever.

the job that was assigned to him? Can you see another way that he could have approached the task at hand?

- c) Do you agree with the criticism of the former *Post* foreign correspondent that there are “large subjects that they just don’t seem to deal with”? In a world where international coverage from other outlets is available at a key-stroke, is it a better use of resources to do excellent work in a few areas rather than spreading yourself too thin?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: d) Select a major news topic and examine *Post* stories covering it from before Brauchli’s arrival in July 2008 and today. What differences do you see? Do you agree with Sherman that Brauchli’s *Post* could be improved with more financial resources? e) Read the *Post*’s “Top Secret America” series (projects.washingtonpost.com/top-secret-america). Write a sample pitch for a similar series on another subject. Could it be done while keeping costs low? f) Compare the *Post*’s coverage of a particular international story to that of the BBC, Guardian or New York Times. Do you agree with Sherman’s contention that the *Post* more often views international issues through a U.S. lens? g) Visit washingtonpost.com. Do you agree that it’s difficult to navigate? How would you improve it?

3. SEE IT NOW! (pp. 38–43): Is the Web giving up too soon on video journalism?

- a) Do you routinely view video news online? Why or why not? Is it because stories are “lost in the flood of other video,” as Drew suggests, or for other reasons, such as bandwidth concerns or the difficulties of viewing video while multitasking?

- b) Try to envision a scenario in which video news reports could, as Drew suggests, be as ubiquitous as blogs and tweets. Are there inherent differences in presentation that could prove to be obstacles?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) View the videos at www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/drew_links.php. Do you think they add a new dimension that print stories could not? Could any of them have been presented equally well using text or video? d) Use Google News to search for video of Rich Matthews’ Gulf oil spill dive, limiting yourself to search terms that one might use without knowing about the story ahead of time (i.e., “gulf oil spill,” but not Matthews’ name). How hard is it to find? What improvements do you think Google and other search engines could make to enable users to more easily find news video on the Web? e) Visit YouTube’s news page (youtube.com/news). Would you visit this site (or other video news aggregators) to find video news clips on a regular basis? Why or why not?

4. WHAT IS RUSSIA TODAY? (pp. 44–49): An English-language news channel created as a Kremlin mouth-piece tries to reinvent itself.

- a) Do you agree with Lavelle that Russia Today’s Kremlin ties are no different than Rupert Murdoch paying the bills for his newspapers? How would you address these concerns if you were a reporter or editor for Russia Today?

- b) How would you respond if your boss ordered you to report on a war from a particular perspective with a gun visible on his desk? What if the threat instead just consisted of being fired?

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c) Watch several Russia Today news segments on YouTube (youtube.com/user/RussiaToday). How does it compare with other TV news coverage you’re familiar with? How could it be improved and professionalized? d) How does the controversy over Russia Today’s coverage of the Ossetian War compare with debates over U.S. army censorship of publishing images of wounded U.S. soldiers (bit.ly/cjr-iraq-photos)? Could the two countries’ media learn anything from each other regarding war coverage?

Quick Takes

Read these short articles in class and discuss:

- 1) **Coffee, Tea...and a Scoop (p. 10–11):** Do you think café-based newsrooms could catch on in the rest of the world? Is easier access to journalists for people on the street an inherently good thing, or will it subject reporters to whoever talks the loudest? What do you think it would be like in your community?

- 2) **Darts & Laurels (p. 13):** What recent news stories would you like to read or hear epilogues to? Look at the stories in today’s paper, and suggest ideas for followups several months down the road.

- 3) **Tea Party Poopers (pp. 14–16):** Do you agree that liberal outlets like Talking Points Memo and The Rachel Maddow Show didn’t take the Tea Party seriously enough at the beginning? And do you think the mainstream media was right to focus more on this “bold new movement” than on funding from groups like Koch Family Foundations? What’s the most important way to cover emerging political movements: to look at leaders, at grassroots support, at funders?

- 4) **Traffic Jam (pp. 17–18):** Does it matter whether online traffic statistics are accurate, so long as they can be reliably used to compare the relative popularity of sites? If you were running a website such as Talking Points Memo, how would learning that most of your audience doesn’t make it to the end of longer pieces influence your editorial decisions?