

# 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. FADE TO BLACK (pp. 24–28):** A video revolution is taking place everywhere except for US TV news.

- a) Do you agree with Dave Marash that video is the best way to convey information to the most people the most powerfully? What are the pros and cons of telling a story in video rather than in print, audio, or still photos?
- b) When you turn to televised news, do you and your classmates prefer to see live reports, in-depth investigative coverage, or experts debating the issues of the day? What does this indicate about whether talk is replacing video reporting because it's more popular or cheaper?
- c) Have sites like YouTube helped fill in the gap left by decreased video reporting on TV networks? What can you learn from amateur video uploads, and what's missing without in-depth professional coverage? Do you think it would be sustainable for TV news to "cede the video field to amateurs" and mostly provide talk and panel discussions to supplement YouTube and the like?
- d) What sources did you go to initially for news about Osama bin Laden's death? Where did you find the best information? Do you think this event will make you any quicker to go to overseas outlets for coverage of future breaking news?

**BEYOND THE CLASSROOM:** e) Watch half an hour of either a nightly network news show or cable news coverage, and chart how many minutes are devoted to talk vs. live reporting. Are there stories that you think could have been improved by more live reports? What do you think would help encourage better coverage? f) Perform

## In This Issue



Every few months, it seems, a recruiting scandal rocks the college sports world. The latest, an account of millions of dollars in cash, gifts, and entertainment (including prostitutes) that a booster gave to Miami Hurricanes players over the last decade, has threatened to bring down that school's athletic program and made headlines worldwide.

Uncovering such malfeasance has helped make the careers of investigative journalists and won awards, but as Daniel Libit argues in "The Scandal Beat," focusing narrowly on schools that have violated NCAA rules has helped obscure the deeper problem: schools are earning millions off the labor of unpaid athletes, helping to encourage under-the-table payoffs. Even some of the reporters who've broken NCAA scandal stories worry that they're doing too much to call attention to the symptom and not the underlying disease.

Elsewhere in this issue, veteran TV journalist Dave Marash looks at how US news networks have turned away from actual video reporting in favor of talking-head debates; Dale Maharidge and Michael S. Williamson present a photo tour of the falling middle class; Curtis Brainard looks at the Obama Administration's failed promises of scientific transparency; and Paul Starobin explores the troublesome relationship between the White House and preferred pundits.

a similar analysis of half an hour of the BBC, RT, or Al Jazeera English, and compare with the US outlets. Which coverage did you find more enlightening? More entertaining?

**2. THE SCANDAL BEAT (pp. 29–33):** Journalists have done an excellent job of uncovering NCAA scandals, but are they missing the forest for the trees?

- a) Is the best measure of college athletic program malfeasance whether a school has violated NCAA rules? Are there instances—whether in college sports or the wider world—in which following the rules can be more of an ethical violation than not following them? Is “Here are the rules, and if people are breaking those rules we’re going to report on that?” a sound journalistic principle?
- b) Do you agree with Rick Telander’s assessment that “We accept the Big Lie, so we are dazzled and amazed by the little lies”? If so, what would it take to change this, and what should journalists be doing to help?

**BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c)** Read Charles Robinson’s coverage of the recent Miami Hurricanes scandal for Yahoo! ([yhoo.it/cjr-robinson](http://yhoo.it/cjr-robinson)). How much is it limited to the ways in which NCAA rules were broken in this instance, as opposed to examining systemic problems? Does he ever discuss the notion that college athletes are effectively “sharecroppers,” as he tells Libit he believes they are? If you were Robinson’s editor, would you want him to incorporate that kind of analysis, or steer clear of it? **d)** Read Tommy Craggs’ critique of Sports Illustrated’s investigation of Ohio State coach Jim Tressel ([deadsp.in/cjr-tressel](http://deadsp.in/cjr-tressel)), in which Craggs calls SI “mall cops for the NCAA.” Is that a fair criticism? What do you think of SI reporter George Dohrmann’s response that that would be like “saying The New York Times is the Justice Department’s mall cop”? **e)** What’s the rationale for not paying college athletes? Does it hold up under scrutiny? Write a 700-word op-ed arguing for the solution you think would best resolve the NCAA’s ongoing scandal issues.

**3. A CLOSED DOOR (pp. 40–44):** Barack Obama promised to improve transparency and access to government scientists, but his administration’s record remains spotty.

- a) Why is it important for journalists to be able to interview government scientists on the record and without “minders” present? What kinds of stories might they not be able to report without access to EPA employees?
- b) Do reporters have any recourse to government restrictions on access? Discuss what would happen if a news outlet refused to grant government officials off-the-record status as a condition of a press briefing.

**BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c)** Research the Society for Environmental Journalists’ list of recommendations on press access. Do they seem reasonable? Draft a letter to the EPA with your own suggestions for improving press relations.

**4. ALL THE PRESIDENT’S PUNDITS (pp. 45–48):** High-profile pundits such as Fareed Zakaria often end up advising elected officials on the same subjects that they’re reporting on.

- a) What restrictions do you think opinion columnists should put on themselves with regard to consulting with elected officials? Should they ever offer advice to people they’re writing about? Should they have to disclose this in their public writings?
- b) What limits, if any, would you place on yourself if you were a political columnist? Would you agree to an off-the-record talk with the President on political issues? What about accepting invitations to state dinners?

**BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: c)** Look at the books on President Obama’s summer vacation book lists, and read what any columnists on the list have written about Obama since their books appeared there. Is there any sign that a Presidential endorsement can help soften writers’ criticism of the White House?

## Quick Takes

Read these short articles in class and discuss:

- 1) **Pirate Radio, Mayan Style (p. 17–18):** Should radio stations only be available to those who can afford to pay for frequency licenses? Can you think of any fairer ways of dividing up the broadcast spectrum?
- 2) **Along Recession Road (p. 34–39):** Do you read stories like these when they appear in the newspaper? Are you more interested when they portray formerly middle-class people who have now fallen on hard times? If so, do you think that has an effect on what stories appear in news coverage?
- 3) **What a Country (p. 55–56):** How have you and your classmates experienced the Great Recession? Do you agree with Don Peck that the US is now a “two-speed society” exacerbated by the “slow hollowing of the middle class”? What kind of reporting do you think is best at explicating these broad economic trends: policy analysis like Peck’s, or narrative profiles like Buzzell’s? Or does each have its place?
- 4) **Happy Birthday, Wikipedia! (p. 63):** Have you or your classmates ever written or edited a Wikipedia entry? Are there any improvements you’d like to see made to the way the site is run? Do you think it’s possible to truly remain neutral in choosing what’s relevant information to include about a topic?