



## Opening Shot



DAVID STRATHAIRN PORTRAYS EDWARD R. MURROW IN George Clooney's new movie *Good Night and Good Luck*. Read any one of several excellent biographies of Murrow. Why was he so universally respected as a journalist? What did he believe is the essence of good journalism? If he were alive, what would he think about the current state of broadcast journalism?

## Talking Points

IN THIS issue several articles discuss how vital stories are going uncovered. This is due in part to the kinds of financial decrees that we tend to think of as coming from widget manufacturers, not newspaper publishers. Complex coverage of nuclear weapons safety, poverty, and the shady practices of some pharmaceutical companies are only some of the stories that have fallen victim to staff cutbacks, shrunken newsholes, and beat reporters who are hesitant to bite the hands that feed them tips and stories.

What can be done to reverse these alarming trends? What will be the fate of newspapers if they don't serve their readers better? Does it have to take a hurricane to free journalists to do the kind of work they must do if democracy is to survive? What do you think?

To get CJR into your students' hands through low-cost subscriptions, contact Dennis Giza at [dfg2@columbia.edu](mailto:dfg2@columbia.edu).

### ARTICLES OF FAITH, PP. 22-26:

What is the difference between public relations and journalism? Can a publication or TV program with a mandate not to contradict the views of its owner be considered a journalistic enterprise? Why or why not? Ask students to compare and contrast the views of Bishop Robert Finn and Bishop Raymond J. Boland on editorial freedom. With whom do students agree? Would they feel the same way if they ran the organization that owned the publication? Can an independent editorial policy generally better serve the organization that puts out the publication? Do students think an organization such as the Catholic Church helps itself or hurts itself by clamping down on dissent? Why or why not? As journalists, would your students want to edit a publication that ultimately didn't have editorial freedom? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Have students read the latest issue of *America*. Have them compare it with earlier editions when it was being edited by Father Thomas J. Reese. How is it different? Is the new editor toeing the Church's line? Under whose stewardship has *America* better served its readers? Why? Have students find publications of other religious groups, corporations, or civic or religious organizations. Which do they think is the most successful? Why?

### UNCHARTED WATERS, PP. 28-34:

Ask students to comment on the dedication of the *Picayune* staff. Why were they so committed to putting out the newspaper? How did Hurricane Katrina and the reporting by the *Picayune* demonstrate the importance of a newspaper to its surrounding community, as well as the need to cover serious issues before they explode? What role should the *Picayune* play in the rebuilding of New Orleans? What is the proper role of any newspaper in the affairs of the community it serves? What would happen to the paper and the city if there were serious cutbacks at the *Picayune*? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Have students find issues of the *Picayune* (online if necessary) from before and after the hurricane. How did the paper cover poverty prior to the hurricane? How has its coverage changed since then? Does it seem that the hurricane has given the paper a new purpose? If so, how? Have students find and comment on the newspaper's investigative stories which accurately predicted how a hurricane could nearly destroy the city. Why was the story essentially ignored?

### DRUG TEST, PP. 44-50:

Why is the thimerosal question proving to be a test for journalism? What are the different reasons why reporters and editors have shied away from the story? Ask students to find in the reluctance to write about thimerosal a connection to criticisms raised elsewhere in this issue regarding the lack of coverage of nuclear weapons and poverty. Who claimed that the thimerosal theory is being pushed by crackpots and zealots? Why has the charge stuck, and why do such charges often stick, even if they're demonstrably false? (Cite, for example, the widespread belief that Al Gore claimed to have invented the Internet.) Can students come up with other examples? What are the lessons that a young reporter can draw from Schulman's article? Have students read Anahad O'Connor's memo on page 47. Compare his ideas on how to cover the story with the concerns raised by Morton Mintz (p. 13). Do students think O'Connor attacked the story correctly? How would students have reported it? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Have students do an online search for thimerosal and an archival search for it on the Web sites of several major newspapers. Have them analyze the coverage for the quality of its reporting and writing. Ask them to cite what they think is excellent reporting on thimerosal while also noting examples of bias in the stories they find.

#### **Between the Lines**

- 1) Why do newspapers tend not to cover poverty issues? Suggest five stories directly relating to poverty in your community. Report and write one of them.
- 2) Do you agree or disagree with Judge Richard Posner's thinking about reporter's privilege? Explain.
- 3) How is war reporting different today from how it was in Vietnam and before? Why is it different? Would you want to be a war reporter? Why or why not?
- 4) Read any of A.J. Liebling's books. What is unique about his work? What made him such an excellent reporter?

#### **Quick Take**

Get a copy of your local newspaper and answer the questions posed atop the right column of the editorial, "Something to Discover" (p. 10). See if you can find a copy of the same paper from ten or twenty years ago. How does it compare?

As a class, create a poll for the students at your school. What are their primary and secondary sources of news? Do they read newspapers regularly? Why or why not? What do they like or dislike about their local newspaper? Have them explain their answers. Add additional questions of your own. Collate and interpret the results in light of the issues raised in the editorial.

### WORKING THE FRINGES, PP. 52-56:

Have students explain Jay Rosen's comment on the top of page 53. What are some of the things that readers and viewers have a right to expect from journalism, according to the author? Can students add anything to the list? Compare his ideas to limits placed on reporters and editors as discussed in the opening editorial (p. 10). The author discusses how a partisan, choreographed political system has failed to effectively address the real problems facing human society. What role has the press played in that failure? Why? Why does cable news tend to avoid larger more complex stories? What can be done about this? (Would Judge Posner think something should be done to address cable's liabilities?). Ask students to apply to journalism Jared Diamond's

theory about reexamining long-held core values. What values should the press address and fix? Can journalism be made to be immune from bottom-line values? Should it be? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Have students research the controversy over the Freedom Museum at Ground Zero. What did that say about the reluctance to examine the American myth? How can such a reluctance be overcome? Have students come up with five major stories that any newspaper should assign. Have them also suggest follow ups for each of the stories. Have them write and report one of the stories on their list.