

# COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

Strong Press, Strong Democracy

## Going Nowhere Fast

Journalism spins the hamster wheel  
DEAN STARKMAN

### WHERE WILL MARCUS BRAUCHLI TAKE THE WASHINGTON POST?

SCOTT SHERMAN

### CAN VIDEO JOURNALISM GROW UP?

JILL DREW

### ANNUAL BOOKS ISSUE: WRITING ABOUT WAR

CONNIE SCHULTZ on Michael Herr's *Dispatches*  
JUDITH MATLOFF on C. J. Chivers's *The Gun*  
PETER DUFFY on Michael Sweeney's *Secrets of Victory*  
BARRY STRAUSS on John W. Dower's *Cultures of War*



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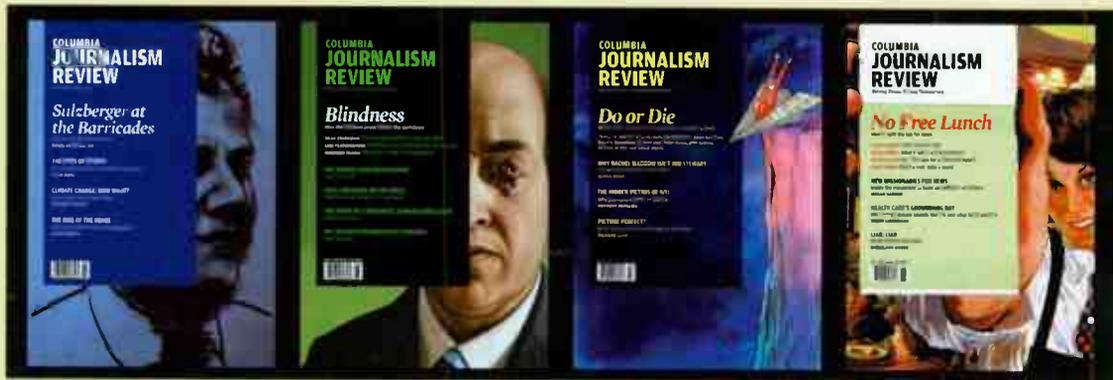
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Strong Press, Strong Democracy

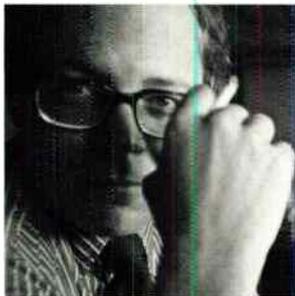
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# COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

September/October 2010

"To assess the performance of journalism... to help stimulate continuing improvement in the profession, and to speak out for what is right, fair, and decent."  
—from the founding editorial, 1961



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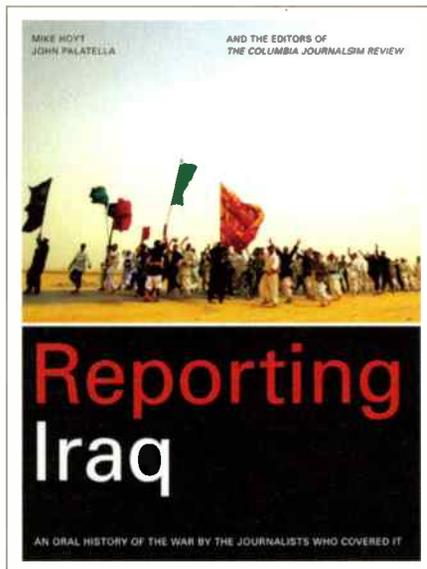
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# Opening Shot



**T**he president didn't send me over here to seek a graceful exit." So said General David Petraeus in one of many interviews during a press blitz as the summer of 2010 moved toward fall. He was just weeks into running a war that is nearly nine years old, trying to make the case that the pieces necessary for success in Afghanistan, especially troop strength, are finally in place. And, implicitly, that the effort is worth the price. As we write, the latest to bear the cost was an Army sergeant from the 82nd Airborne Division, Christopher Karch, of Indianapolis, age twenty-three. He was number 1,215 among U.S. casualties, killed by small-arms fire when insurgents attacked his unit in the Arghandab Valley. The public will be more consciously trying to measure such sacrifice against the war's progress in the coming year, and it is the duty of the press to help them. For some inspiration, perhaps, in what is our annual books issue, we take a look at books about wars past, starting on page 50 with Connie Schultz's salute to Michael Herr's Vietnam classic, *Dispatches*. It is the book she turned to as a young woman in blue-collar Ohio, when she wondered why so many young men left her hometown "full of brag and bravado" but came home "spent and eerily old." **CJR**

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**In battle** A marine sets up a machine gun during a two-hour, mid-August firefight with members of the Taliban in Helmand province.



## What We've Sown

*The nation needs better coverage of the Farm Bill*

The debate over the 2012 Farm Bill is already under way. Colin Peterson, the chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, conducted a series “field hearings” in farm country earlier this year to gather input from the public, and he hopes to have a bill on the president’s desk by the end of 2011. ¶ We applaud the early start on this crucial piece of legislation. We urge the press to follow suit and commit to prominent, sustained, and

substantive coverage of this debate—the kind of coverage that has been conspicuously absent on these issues.

The Farm Bill, which is renegotiated every five years, is a sprawling, complex piece of legislation that mushroomed from an emergency bailout for farmers during the Great Depression to arguably the most important force shaping our food system, farm, and land-use policies. It also has become a factor in energy policy, thanks to the steady expansion (and heavy subsidization) of ethanol.

America’s system of agriculture, defined and sustained by this legislation, places improving crop yield above all other goals. This focus on yield has made food in the U.S. relatively cheap and plentiful, but it also has become clear, thanks in part to good work by journalists, that the system has serious hidden costs. The tangle of farm subsidies (\$15.4 billion last year)—the bulk of which go to the operations that need them least—get most of the attention in the debate over

farm-policy dysfunction, but the problem is much deeper than that. There are environmental concerns, food safety lapses, and the appalling treatment of farm and processing-plant workers, to name but a few.

Agribusiness and commodity growers—the so-called farm bloc—effectively built the current system and dominate the debate. Breaking their grip to allow fundamental change will be difficult.

For real change to have a chance, the public needs a better understanding of the Farm Bill and how it affects them. This is a significant challenge for the press, one made even more difficult by the fact that the agriculture beat has withered. As America moved away from the farm, so did journalism. Between 1975 and 1995, the number of U.S. daily newspapers with a full-time agriculture writer dropped 62 percent, according to *The Invisible Farm*, by Thomas F. Pawlick. Coverage of how the food we eat is produced became an afterthought.

Agriculture became a business story and a political story, skewed toward the interests of agribusiness executives and other players in the farm-policy arena. There is still excellent coverage that departs from this top-down approach, but it tends to come in one-off projects—like the devastating series on the USDA that Mike McGraw and Jeff Taylor wrote in 1991 for *The Kansas City Star*, or “Harvesting Cash,” the 2006 series on subsidies in *The Washington Post* by Dan Morgan, Gilbert M. Gaul, and Sarah Cohen. The former won a Pulitzer, the latter was a finalist. Both covered a lot of the same ground and together showed how

little has changed in farm policy. None of the reporters was on the agriculture beat.

Over the last decade, interest in how our food is produced and consumed has surged, thanks to books like *Fast Food Nation* and documentaries like *Food, Inc.* First Lady Michelle Obama’s focus on childhood obesity is helping to broaden awareness, too. The Farm Bill is about much more than food, but this heightened interest creates an opening for more and better coverage of the full debate. The current fiscal climate, in which anxiety over the deficit looms large, offers perhaps the best chance in recent memory to begin to make real change in costly, inefficient farm programs.

As the 2012 Farm Bill takes shape, journalists should devote less time to the incremental, insider drama on Capitol Hill, and more to explaining the issues and their consequences to a public that has little contact with the farm, but a huge stake in what happens there. **CJR**



## The Ralph Gomory Prize

The Ralph Gomory Prize of the Business History Conference (made possible by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation) recognizes historical work on the effect business enterprises have on the economic conditions of a country in which they operate. Two prizes of \$5000 are awarded annually, one for a book and second for an article, and may be for work published in English in 2009 and 2010. The Gomory Prize will be presented at the annual meeting of the Business History Conference to be held in St. Louis, Missouri, March 31 to April 2, 2011. Book nominations are accepted from publishers and article nominations from the editor of the journal in which an article appears.

Four copies of a book or an electronic version of an article must accompany a nomination and be submitted to the Prize Coordinator, Carol Ressler Lockman, Business History Conference, PO Box 3630, 298 Buck Road, Wilmington DE 19807-0630 USA.  
Email: [clockman@hagley.org](mailto:clockman@hagley.org).

The submission deadline is December 31, 2010.



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The screenshot shows the homepage of the Columbia Journalism Review website. At the top, the browser address bar displays "http://cjr.org/". The site header includes the title "COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW" and the tagline "Strong Press, Strong Democracy". Navigation links for "Desks", "Blogs", "Columns", "Talk", "Magazine", "Multimedia", "Projects", "Resources", and "S" are visible. A featured article titled "Dumb Like a Fox" by Terry McDermott is highlighted, with a sub-headline: "Fox News isn't part of the GOP; it has simply (and shamelessly) mastered the confines of cable". To the right, a "DESKS" section lists various topics like "Campaign Desk", "The Audit", "The Observatory", and "Behind the News". A small thumbnail of the "Dumb Like a Fox" article is also visible in the bottom right corner of the screenshot.

### One for the Books

As a journalism professor and newspaper consultant, I'm always looking for new books about trends in journalism. And I can say the "best book" I have read in years is the July/August edition of the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

I got a better idea of the new models for newspapers that are in the works, the opportunities for those early adopters of e-readers, and the new type of local and political journalism that is being put into practice. I can compare the July/August CJR to the Spring 1995 *Time* magazine I keep titled "Welcome to Cyberspace," which woke me up to a new era of information opportunities.

Homero Hinojosa  
Monterrey, Mexico

### What Second Chance?

Re: "A Second Chance" by Curtis Brainard (CJR, July/August). No, e-readers won't save journalism—at least not the kind that Brainard and the *Columbia Journalism Review* practice.

Consider the people who have read Brainard's essay online. What percentage of readers consumed it on an e-reader, iPod, iPad, Android phone, or any other mobile device, relative to the percentage of readers who are looking at it on a PC or laptop screen? I suspect the mobile-to-PC ratio is quite small—maybe just a few percentage points, if that. I further believe that even among those who are looking at it on a mobile device or e-reader, very few are reading it from start to finish. Like many publishers, CJR is still oriented toward long prose pieces that are a poor fit for mobile devices or the people who own them. Who is going to read a 4,546-word analysis (the length of this essay) on a small screen, or even a thousand-word news article? How many would be willing to shell out subscription fees for long-form *Time*, *Wired*, or *Washington Post* print content on a Nook or iPhone?

Ian Lamont  
Auburndale, MA



### How many would be willing to shell out subscription fees for long-form print content on a Nook or iPhone?

E-book readers, smart phones, e-ink, flexible screens, multi-platform feeds—none of these matter if people aren't willing to pay for the product. And this is where newsmen have to take a good long honest look at themselves and ask, "Are there really that many people who are willing to pay for this, and why should they?" Once you get 60 percent of the average people in a given region to agree that the product is worth paying for, newsmen will have a logical business model. But until then, they will be continually marketing to the Luddite or dying markets of print, thumbs in their ears, ignoring the production improvements that need to be done to make it worth shelling out the dwindling number of dollars the average American has.

Chris Tompkins  
San Francisco, CA

So what will this advance in e-reader penetration mean for the job of a newspaper reporter? I suspect it means that reporters would be expected to constantly break news 24/7 (maybe this is already the case for some). I also suspect that the reporter would be paid about the same he/she is now making, if not less. How many people, especially talented ones with other options, are going to be willing to do this? And if they're not, regardless of how slick the delivery model is, how good will the product be?

Rick

Comment posted on CJR.org

Curtis Brainard responds: Let me take these three letters in order.

- Today's LCD screens are hard on the eyes and e-paper screens don't deliver the full-color video experience that most consumers are looking for. That will change. More and more people will become accustomed to reading long-form work on a screen—especially as screen technology improves, which it is doing rapidly. Manufacturers have already made a lot of progress with so-called transfective displays that combine the best attributes of transmissive LCD screens and reflective e-paper. Moreover, screen sizes need not remain small. E-readers designed for periodicals, such as the Que, are already using larger format screens that are flexible and incredibly durable. Eventually, we may end up with what Jason Heikenfeld at the Novel Devices Laboratory in Cincinnati calls "ubiquitous e-paper." Or we will have a situation in which there are many different—and excellent—types of screen technologies. Progress on all of these fronts will make long-form reading much easier.

- It is true that newspapers are not yet selling a large number of subscriptions via e-readers, but there is good reason to expect that will change, too. In late April, the Audit Bureau of Circulations announced that newspaper circulation

had fallen nearly 9 percent compared to a year earlier, but also that subscriptions to the top twenty-five newspaper e-editions—which include digital replicas, online-only subscriptions, and products like Times Reader, in addition to e-reader subscriptions—were up 40 percent. It may be a while before you start to see 60 percent of most neighborhoods purchasing subscriptions—but some already are; just ask the Detroit Media Partnership.

• Finally, what the “e-reading revolution,” such as it is, will mean for the job of a newspaper reporter is a very good and difficult question. Ostensibly, the point of regaining control over channels of delivery is to rebuild revenue streams from subscriptions and, more importantly, advertising. One would hope that some of the proceeds would then be reinvested in reporting capacity. We will continue to live in a 24/7 news world

for the rest of our days, but that’s not a bad thing if news outlets have the resources to beef up staffing and support for their journalists. Lack of manpower helps create the “Hamster Wheel” effect that my colleague Dean Starkman bemoans in this issue’s cover story. More revenues, more manpower. And, more important, better-quality stories. This is important: reading the news on mobile devices is, at least for now, more like the curated experience of a printed paper than a discombobulating trip around the Web. Hopefully, editors will realize that it is that curation of high-quality information that busy people are willing to pay for. And they will thus give their reporters the time and support needed to produce valuable content.

#### Measure of a Man

Thank you, Don Terry, for sharing this account of John Conroy’s predicament

## NOTES FROM OUR ONLINE READERS

ON JULY 28, CJR’S CLINT HENDLER TOLD “THE STORY BEHIND THE PUBLICATION of WikiLeaks’s Afghanistan Logs,” in which the *Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *Der Spiegel*, in collaboration, vetted the raw material provided by Julian Assange of WikiLeaks. Here’s what a couple of our readers had to say:

The raw logs have not been published by anyone yet, only four doctored versions. It is not clear what the raw logs looked like. Nor have the raw logs been authenticated by anyone. Instead, the three newspapers have issued disclaimers to protect against dupey. *The New York Times* rewrote every sample file it published. The *Guardian* published a mere .33 percent of the dump. There has been no credible explanation made public about how the files were vetted, by whom and by what method. This is not a question about what journalists thought of the files, but what technical means were used to assure that easily manipulated digital files had not been tampered with, deployed as a deliberate plant, recovered from a digital dumpster, cooked into a stew of odds and ends from several collections and sources....

Julian Assange (and his unidentified technical, legal, and narrative team) knows more about digital subterfuge, his lifetime passion and expertise, than the entire kaboodle of seasoned journalists and their backstopping legal and editorial teams—all ripe in paper and ink world, conceited about their success and prowess, determined to not be put to pasture by upstart digital euthanists... with Nick Davies [of the *Guardian*] leading the pack. Hi Nick, you’ve been had. —*John Young*

The reality is that WikiLeaks doesn’t have the capacity to authenticate, much less analyze, the volume of data in the logs. It can play to its strength, which is to provide data in structured format, and use its credibility to attract institutions to do some of the lifting. The data provided by WikiLeaks is valuable to these three organizations, but their imprimatur is valuable to WikiLeaks, too. Assange is at the moment almost discarded by the establishment media. That’s to their shame. It’s a testament to his brilliance in handling this leak that the innate competitiveness of these organizations fueled the initial reportage, I say “initial” because this story will continue to evolve. It will be driven not by the establishment media but by those best able to make use of the structured data on offer.... This story gives valuable insight into the process, but what we have is only liftoff. We will wait to see how the crowd, applying imagination and elbow grease, makes use of this treasure trove. —*PlebisPower*

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("Justice for Conroy," *CJR*, July/August). About ten years ago, I spent a summer in Chicago for the Academy for Alternative Journalism, a program (I think) co-sponsored by the *Chicago Reader* and Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism. Conroy came to speak to our class about public records and research techniques. Since being introduced to his work, I regard it as the standard to which I always aspire.

I hope that Conroy knows that, besides all the individuals he has helped through his stories, the voiceless for whom he has brought justice, there are journalists and writers who are inspired by his lifelong commitment to the fundamental purpose of journalism—to reveal the truth, to tell meaningful stories that make a difference. I know I appreciate the example he has set. I appreciate the life he has chosen and the sacrifices that have come with it. I appreciate his diligence and his persistence, and I hope that on some level, he believes it was worth it. Because it was.

*Catharine Lo  
Haleiwa, HI*

Allowing seasoned investigative reporters like John Conroy to languish is a mortal sin—a sin this society will pay for in years to come. I know of too many good reporters who have been laid off for any number of reasons—mostly because their bosses replaced them with younger and cheaper writers—with no history or understanding of the elements that can heighten a story. His experience is a gift and one that any self-respecting news outlet should welcome—especially in Chicago. Step up to the plate, all you publishers and editors-in-chief. HIRE THIS MAN!

*Maureen McFadden  
Santa Barbara, CA*

I was/am (not sure really) an aspiring Chicago-area journalist who's interned at the *Chicago Reader*, among other places. When I was deciding whether to pursue the field before graduating last year, I talked to many journalists I admire, all of whom 1) responded to my e-mails, which was something of a surprise; 2) said "no" with varying degrees of emphasis.

I e-mailed John Conroy, too.

His "no" was the most emphatic. "If you can do anything else, anything at all," he told me. "Do it."

Well, I couldn't find a job in journalism—got beat out for an entry-level beat reporting job in rural Illinois by a laid-off *Sun-Times* reporter in one case—so I took my liberal arts degree and Did Something Else. It's going well, and I really like my job, and I'm still writing for the public good. Conroy's "no" was one of the most disheartening, though. I had hoped that maybe his prospects had picked up since he had offered me his advice, but it doesn't seem like it. Thanks for a great piece.

*Katie Buitrago  
Chicago, IL*

### Oh, And by the Way

Great story ("Lone Star Trailblazer" by Jake Batsell, *CJR*, July/August), but I don't think the salary database being the most popular feature on Texas Tribune's site is much of an issue. Historically, people have picked up newspapers just to see box scores, TV listings, classifieds, coupons, or comics. That hasn't affected the impact of the important investigative and public-policy reporting that is also inside.

In fact, I'd say the reporting is buoyed by those features. They increase the breadth of the paper's audience, which brings a bigger impact. You don't want your publication to be read solely by insiders. Maybe some of the other readers will glance at the investigative piece. If it weren't for some of the lighter features, they may never have had that chance.

*Matthew Watkins  
Houston, TX*

### Ask the Experts

Thanks to Alissa Quart for "The Trouble With Experts" (*CJR*, July/August). It may be a good outline for where the news business is heading: a new model in which news organizations gather and report the news, and expert online communities analyze and draw conclusions from that reporting.

The BP oil spill is a good case in point. *The Wall Street Journal* did some excellent reporting and investigative work, but it was online expert communities, such as The Oil Drum blog, that provided the

best analysis. I laughed as CNN headlines proclaimed the success of the effort to cap the leak (relying on BP and government statements), while the “experts” posting in the comments on The Oil Drum blog were much more skeptical (and correct).

As you mentioned, Tyler Cowen shows us another good example. At the start of the financial crisis, I relied on newspapers (mostly) to provide breaking news and some investigative reporting, while I followed several blogs (Calculated Risk, Marginal Revolution, EconBrowser, Baseline Scenario, etc.) for analysis.

It’s relatively easy to sort out who the real experts are by reading their body of online work. Even if you haven’t been following a subject, you can quickly come up to speed because most analysis comes complete with copious amounts of cross-linking.

*Jim Richmond  
Newfields, NH*

While I am more than happy for people to read “expert” opinions on movie re-

views from the IMDB, when it comes to health science like autism, the subject is just too complicated for untrained people to do anything more than guess. I don’t care if your kid has autism, it doesn’t make you an expert. But it may make you a danger.

*Craig van Nieuwkerk  
Melbourne, Australia*

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## EDITOR’S NOTE

MY CO-PILOT AT THIS MAGAZINE, BRENT CUNNINGHAM, CJR’S MANAGING editor/print, has a slightly darker view of this world than my own, and often accuses me of being an optimist. When it comes to the *Columbia Journalism Review*, I plead guilty as charged. We live inside a great university, but its walls do not shelter us from the economic weather. On that front, we’re on our own. Still, despite ferocious storms lately, we’re okay for now. We have ended the fiscal year in the black four years running, even as we raise our editorial ambitions. This is thanks to the dedication of Dennis Giza, CJR’s deputy publisher, who with wisdom and patience keeps many errant ducks in line; of Janine Jaquet, who brought imagination and lots of high-heel shoe leather to fundraising for CJR (Janine is elevating to the seventh floor, where she’ll do the same for the Graduate School of Journalism); and of our chairman, Victor Navasky, who, with his graceful touch, keeps the enterprise steadily chugging forward, with the help of his consigliere, Peter Osnos. I cannot say that the budget process each year has been unlike *The Perils of Pauline*, but we have not been distracted from CJR’s mission.

I’m suffering from a fresh case of optimism now because, as you can see on our masthead, we have a new member of the team, Cathryn Cranston, the first full-time CJR publisher in memory. This is good news for us, and for CJR readers online and in print. She speaks digital; she understands advertising; she thinks big; and she loves journalism. She led the *Harvard Business Review* from 2002 to 2006, raising its revenue 27 percent and, we’re told, “repositioned the brand as a global thought leader.” That has a nice ring to it.

Cranston sees great possibilities for extending the reach and the impact of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, as do the rest of us. So, welcome, Cathy. We’re glad you’re here.

—Mike Hoyt



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# Currents



## Coffee, Tea...and a Scoop

When the owner of a former brick-making factory in Kromeriz, Czech Republic, began storing large amounts of the plant's leftover fly ash at his site, he tried to convince nearby residents that it was safe. But one resident, a stay-at-home mother of two young children, wasn't buying it. She brought a circulating petition to a café on the main pedestrian shopping street of this town of 30,000 along the Morava River. There she found not only a cup of coffee, but also the newsroom of the city's newest newspaper, *Nase Adresa*, a hyperlocal weekly designed to bring

journalists closer to the community they cover.

"We met with her about the ash, and the mayor also stopped by to discuss it," says Ondrej Holubec, *Nase Adresa's* chief editor. Together, they researched the effects of exposure to fly ash, which include respiratory problems, and the newspaper published several stories on the potential hazard. Though the factory owner continues to argue his case, the citizen-press collaboration scored some victories. "For now," says Holubec, "the guy has removed the ash."

The Czech Republic has fourteen regions, and there are *Nase Adresa* (*Our Address*) news cafés in four of them. They are part of an experiment launched a year ago by PPF Media, a division of a private investment fund run by Petr Kellner, the richest man in the country.

Each café has about six full-time reporters, most of whom are under thirty, and a handful of stringers. Sales of coffee and sandwiches pay the rent and newsroom expenses. By 2011, PPF plans to have 150 regional weeklies, ninety of which will be based in cafés. PPF has invested about \$12.5 million in the project, which includes Futuroom, the operation's headquarters in Prague. The cafés function like bureaus, and Futuroom serves as both the newsroom hub and a national journalism training facility that provides multimedia packages and infographics to mainstream news outlets around the country. Each café publishes a print weekly, and maintains a daily Web site.

PPF thinks it can tap into local advertising markets by creating a strong bond with the communities. Company officials say it is working, but won't release numbers to back that up. In the Czech Republic, as in the U.S., traditional news outlets are embattled, competing with digital startups for advertisers and readers and struggling to remain relevant at a time when anyone can launch a Web site and

**'I was trying to find a show that Michelle actually watched. All those news shows she's like, "Eh, let me get the clicker."'—President Obama on his decision to go on *The View***

call himself a journalist. In Kromeriz, for instance, *Nase Adresa* makes life even more complicated for the city's two traditional outlets, *Kromerizsky Denik*, a daily, and *Tydenik Kromerizska*, a weekly.

By creating an informal space where reporters and readers can come together, if not as equals then as equally concerned citizens, *Nase Adresa* hopes to foster a give and take that will make residents feel invested in the newspaper and its success. Toward that end, the cafés also host readings and forums on local issues. (The idea is catching, as Gannett News Service recently launched a similar café-based newsroom in New Jersey, where "citizen journalists" contribute to a hyperlocal blog overseen by a professional editor.)

*Nase Adresa's* bread and butter is an unspectacular mix of bridge closings, business openings, profiles of promising students, and plenty of local sports—the routine fare of a small town. But it also tackles harder news and investigations, like the fly-ash problem. "This year we've had at least ten investigative stories that have come to us from residents," says Holubec.

It's not exactly *All The President's Men*, but it is a civilized twist on the efforts to reconcile professional and "citizen" journalism. After all, anything's possible over a good cup of coffee.

—Patti McCracken

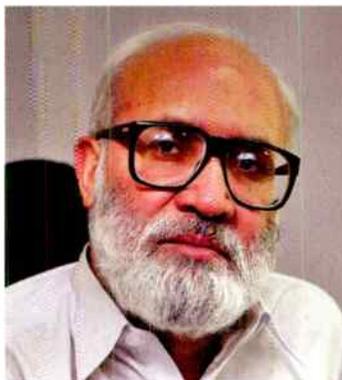
## The Fixer

*THROUGH THREE DECADES of war in neighboring Afghanistan, Pakistani journalist Rahimullah Yusufzai, right, has been the ultimate fixer, the man foreign reporters—from Lawrence Wright to Seymour Hersh—go to for the lay of the land or to arrange a hard-to-get interview with a militia commander. The fifty-six-year-old resident editor of The News, Pakistan's largest English-language daily, was the first to report on the Taliban movement from Kandahar and has interviewed Taliban chief Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden several times. Shahan Mufti spoke with Yusufzai in July in his Peshawar office. A longer version of their conversation is at [www.cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/the\\_fixer.php](http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/the_fixer.php).*

### What are the advantages of being both local reporter and foreign correspondent?

I've been to twenty-eight of thirty-four Afghan provinces and that costs a lot of money. My home organizations wouldn't cover any expenses but BBC, *Time*, or ABC would. Of course, the home paper was always happy to get the stories. But more importantly, you should be read in your country. There's a feeling here among government circles, military circles, even the militants, that the foreign media have an anti-Muslim, anti-Pakistan, agenda. If you work only for them, you're

doing what they want. So, in a way, it's practical to work in the local media [laughs].



### How well have Western foreign correspondents covered the region?

There are some old hands who keep coming back. But this story has taken so many turns over the years that even the most experienced journalists arrive here to find themselves lost. [Sunday Times foreign correspondent] Christina Lamb was here a few months ago and she said, "Rahimullah, what is this Waziristan problem? Who are the commanders?" Once, she would have known everyone in the mujahideen camp. She would even go with the mujahideen to the frontlines.

The reporters in the eighties also had real sympathy for the mujahideen—glossing over a lot of very bad things they were doing. I remember in Kunar there was a massacre by the mujahideen and we wrote about it. It was a big mistake by the Western media to ignore all this.

## HARD NUMBERS

**£1** (about \$1.60), the new daily fee to access to *The Times of London* and *The Sunday Times* Web sites

**66** percent drop in visits to the *Times's* sites in the weeks after it introduced the payroll

**14** percent of national print, broadcast, and Web coverage devoted to fired black USDA worker Shirley Sherrod during the week of July 19–25

**26** percent of national print, broadcast, and Web coverage given to Don Imus's "nappy-headed hos" slur on the mostly black Rutgers women's basketball team during the week of April 8–13, 2007

**219** minutes spent discussing the dismissed case against the New Black Panther Party on Fox News's *America Live* between June 30–July 16

**27.2** percent drop in print and Web advertising revenue for newspapers in 2009

**332** (average) percent rise in the price of publicly held newspaper shares over the first six months of 2010

**7** Honduran broadcast journalists shot to death between March 1 and the middle of June

**400** requests from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to the Honduran government for special protection for journalists and activists this year and last; the government ignored most of the requests

MediaMatters, New American Media, Reflections of a Newsosaur, Committee to Protect Journalists, the *Guardian*, Editor & Publisher, Newspaper Association of America

### And newer reporters?

The young journalists coming here now, especially from countries with armies involved, are doing some of the most important reporting. Their stories have an actual impact on domestic politics and public opinion in their countries. Governments have changed because of this war.

### Why are these journalists still targets for kidnapping?

The Taliban got five top commanders released in exchange for Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomo. The Italian government was under serious pressure from the public and pushed the Americans and the Afghans hard to strike a deal. That encouraged the Taliban to go after journalists.

### Your nephew—reporter Mushtaq Yusufzai—was also kidnapped.

He was baited with promises of interviews with top Pakistani Taliban commanders, then he was kept in a basement in a local hideout. We first thought we should call Baitullah Mehsud [then leader of the Pakistani Taliban] and tell him the story; we even drafted a letter. But I wasn't sure he could be very helpful, and many other journalists weren't comfortable with seeking his help. Also,

we were getting signals that the Taliban now believed Mushtaq was innocent. I think Mushtaq's own bravery, the way he answered their questions, was the main reason he got out safe. One of his captors is still in touch with Mushtaq as a source—a very good source.

## Glory Days

WHEN CAMPUS POLICE detained Ohio State University freshman Alex Kotran in April for taking pictures of rogue cows on campus, he didn't retreat silently. The photojournalist for the *OSU Lantern* defended his right as a newsman to document the roving bovines for at least forty minutes before he was cuffed and charged with criminal trespass and "misconduct in a state of emergency."

The charges were later dropped. But even if they hadn't been, Kotran can take heart: if history is any indicator, his journalism career need not end in the dean's office. In fact, a little campus muckraking could be the foundation of a great career.

In the fall of 1950, the *Vanguard*, a student newspaper at Brooklyn College, published an article about how Dr. Harry D. Gideonse, the school's president, had vetoed

a history professor's appointment to department chair. Gideonse retaliated by revoking the *Vanguard's* charter and changing the locks on its office doors. The paper's staff raised funds from the student body to publish a substitute paper, the *Draugnav*, out of a staffer's home basement. Unsatisfied that he had been unable to silence the "lefty" students, Gideonse—later discovered to have been an FBI informant while at the school—suspended the top five editors and the business manager, and put fifty other students on probation. (A letter was sent to each student's parents, many of whom were immigrants and feared deportation.)

Eventually, funding ran out and the *Draugnav* folded. But Gideonse's ill-tempered crusade forged a remarkable bond between the young reporters who rallied against him, four of whom gathered on an unseasonably warm afternoon last April in the Upper West Side apartment of Albert Lasher, a *Vanguard* reporter and production staffer, to share memories, coffee, and macaroons.

"In my career, I never learned as much about journalism as I did in the *Vanguard* cub class," said Myron Kandel, the paper's sports editor, who called the

confrontation "a strengthening experience."

The crackdown "did affect our psyche," said Lasher. But, he added, "It's in your DNA to defy authority if you're really a committed journalist. It didn't affect our careers."

If anything, it seems to have boosted them. Kandel became a financial editor for *The Washington Star*, *The New York Herald Tribune*, and the *New York Post*, and was a co-founder of CNN. Lasher worked as a reporter for *The Wall Street Journal* and as an editor for *BusinessWeek*. Another colleague became a reporter and editor for *The New York Times*; still another became staff director of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Ann Lane, a freshman reporter and the host of the *Draugnav's* production offices, founded the Women and Gender Studies department at the University of Virginia. The list goes on.

As they built their careers, *Vanguard* alumni mastered the art of social networking. Today, they keep in touch through a Web site on the Brooklyn College server that lists recent articles, events, and achievements of its members. October will see a reunion marking sixty years since the paper's demise. Their camaraderie is still clear. "I don't have this with any other group," said Lane.

What advice do they have for Kotran and other student journalists in trouble today? "When you're twenty, you don't know how to move things," Kandel said. "Go to the student body, and ask, 'Would you agree with what the administration is doing?' Go to alumni, ask for funds."

He knows better than to underestimate the power of community.

— Sara Germano

## LANGUAGE CORNER ECHO CHAMBER

Write LanguageCorner@cjr.org

AN ACRONYM OR INITIALISM CAN BECOME SO FAMILIAR THAT WE FORGET WHAT it stands for and add one of its own words back. A PIN, or personal identification number, already has "number" in it, so adding "number" is redundant. ATM (an initialism, since it's not pronounced as a word) stands for automated teller machine, so "machine" is redundant. (In 2001, *New Scientist* magazine named these kinds of redundancies RAS Syndrome. RAS stands for "redundant acronym syndrome." Who says scientists are dull?)

So stop using your PIN number at the ATM machine. Forget about the LCD display on your PC. Don't take the GRE exam or worry about the APR rate for your student loan or cashing out of your IRA account. And never look at a UPC code.

There. Saved you seven words. You're welcome.

—Merrill Perlman

## LAUREL



In an effort to fill the Monday edition, traditionally a thin news day everywhere, city editor Peter Salter has tried a few gimmicks in his ten years at the *Lincoln Journal*

*Star* in Nebraska. One was a feature he called “An Hour Here,” which asked reporters to write a vignette after doing exactly what the title implies. Another was “Long Story Short,” challenging reporters to tell a sharp tale in four hundred words or less. Then last year, a good novel gave him an idea for a recurring Monday feature that would also help the paper solve a persistent problem that was bigger than slow Mondays, one that plagues newsrooms everywhere: lack of follow-up.

The novel, *Twisted Tree*, by Kent Meyers, is about what happens in a small South Dakota town when a local girl is murdered. It made for a riveting tale, Salter says, but the most interesting part came after the plot ran its course. The epilogue, he says, “tied up some loose ends but also told a new story. And I thought, ‘How can we do an epilogue thing in the paper, where we write so many stories every day but don’t always know how things turned out?’”

So Salter came up with a feature in which the paper’s twenty-two city desk reporters and editors take turns following up on old stories from their files or from deep within the *Journal Star’s* archives. There is no statute of limitations, just an expectation that entries will revisit something the paper has published in the past and go beyond a mere update. He calls it “Epilogue.” In an e-mail announcing the assignment, Salter instructed the newsroom, “We need to find new stories—not just a retelling of the original story. So feel free to shift the focus of the story, developing secondary characters and sources: not what happened to the killer, for instance, but what happened to the killer’s daughter.”

The first Epilogue appeared at the end of January and revisited the story of Amber Ramirez, a severely epileptic young woman. The paper had first reported on Amber a decade earlier when half of her brain was surgically removed in an effort to quell the debilitating seizures—as many as a hundred a day—that had plagued her since she was in the fourth grade. The surgery worked, but she lost use of the right side of her body. She had to learn to talk and walk again, but now she shares an apartment with three girlfriends, has a boyfriend, and works at a dog-grooming salon.

Another Epilogue delved into a local man’s investigation into the possibility that a 115-year-old train “accident” that killed eleven could have been sabotage by a rival rail-

road company. Still another followed up on a controversial couple five years after the husband, then twenty-two, was charged with statutory rape and jailed for impregnating and marrying his then thirteen-year-old girlfriend. They were still together but struggling to make ends meet with three kids, including one with cystic fibrosis, and a fourth on the way.

The paper’s health reporter, who was eighteen when his father, a veteran newspaperman, died, wrote an Epilogue about finding his Dad’s 1930’s-era scrapbook of news clips. He used them to paint a picture of life eighty years ago—and to have the conversation he never got to have with his father about covering life in the same Nebraska town. Survivors of a school-bus crash, tornado victims, the unsolved mystery of a couple that went missing in the early 1970s, a woman kidnapped as a toddler by her father—these stories too have been revisited in Epilogue. Each piece includes a link to, or a scanned version of, the original story that inspired the follow-up, and the paper solicits readers for tips. Salter says the Epilogue stories consistently make the front page because they’re often the best thing in the paper.

In the March/April issue of *CJR*, Darts & Laurels told how the *Des Moines Register* had resurrected a story about an Iowa turkey processing plant and the mentally disabled workers who were paid sub-minimum wages to work there—a story the paper had uncovered thirty years before, but that had then languished in the paper’s morgue until a call from one of the workers’ relatives brought the men’s plight to light again. We gave a Laurel to the *Register* for hammering the story a second time around, spurring hearings and enacting reforms, and a Dart to journalism’s bad habit of firing one shot at big stories and then moving on.

Of course, it’s tough enough keeping up with today’s nonstop news cycle without digging into the past for more work, especially at newsrooms stretched to capacity by the double whammy of personnel cuts and the insatiable maw of the Web. These factors often make the journalistic ideal of “follow-up” exactly that—a wish-list, practiced in fits and starts.

The beauty of Epilogue is that it makes the follow-up systematic, thus serving as a partial antidote to journalism’s institutional memory loss, and sometimes connecting the random dots of news that bombard us each day. Readers love it. When the paper published an account of a woman shot three times by her ex-boyfriend thirty years ago, who since has struggled for a full life from her wheelchair, readers raved in the comments section: “Good story. . . We need more like this one.” “Love this series!” So to the *Lincoln Journal Star*, a LAUREL for digging through old notebooks and finding treasure. **CJR**

## Tea Party Poopers

*How the left press helped create a conservative monster*

THE TEA PARTY HAS EVOLVED FROM A CABLE-NEWS CURIOSITY INTO A POLITICAL and cultural force that decides elections and casts an Everest-sized shadow over the coming midterms. It has spawned countless articles, essays, and op-eds that attempt to explain it, define it, and gauge its power.

So it is easy to forget that, in the weeks and months after CNBC's Rick Santelli delivered his February 19, 2009, jeremiad against the Homeowners Affordability and Stability Plan, in which he called for "all the capitalists" to come to Chicago for a "tea party," none of this seemed inevitable. Santelli spent days backpedaling, telling MSNBC's Chris Matthews, for instance, that he had "great respect for the administration" and wanted it to "win." "I'm not coming down hard on Barack," Santelli insisted.

In fact, as the Drudge Report and other conservative outlets pointed readers to a video of Santelli's rant, and people around the country began organizing Tea Party rallies against President Obama's agenda, the broader media world was mostly indifferent. For a brief moment, the Santelli affair was dismissed by many as just another made-for-cable-news drama that would fade when the next one arose.

The left press, in particular, fundamentally misread the Tea Party and inadvertently helped it congeal into a real political force. Its mistake was journalistic: oversimplifying a genuinely complex phenomenon. But the cause was political: a desire to destroy a perceived threat. The new towers of the left media, sites like Talking Points Memo, The Huffington Post, the Center for American Progress's ThinkProgress, and programs like MSNBC's *The Rachel Maddow Show*, did not take the movement seriously and their initial coverage was mocking.

The exception, a piece by Mark Ames and Yasha Levine published on February 27, 2009, on *Playboy's* Web site that attempted to situate Santelli and his rant inside a coordinated "rightwing PR machine," foreshadowed where the left press was headed once mockery failed. CNBC threatened to sue, and *Playboy* removed the piece from its site.

By the summer of 2009, when activists flooded town halls to oppose cap-and-trade and health-care legislation, and into 2010, when the movement started deciding the winners of some early Republican primaries, the liberal press adopted the strategy of the *Playboy* piece and began trying to discredit the Tea Party by exposing its most extreme right-wing elements and its ties to big business.

An early signal that this strategy shift was coming was a March 23, 2009, piece by Lee Fang for ThinkProgress in which he alerted liberals to what he considered the bogus conservative scheme:

The "tea party" protests nationwide are being coordinated by the conservative public relations firm Freedom Works, which is run by former Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-TX). The tea parties are also being supported by Newt Gingrich, through his organization American Solutions For Winning the Future. Members of Congress, such as Rep. Jean Schmidt (R-OH), have appeared at previous rallies. In addition, Fox News' Glenn Beck promotes the protests, and has launched a website publicizing the events.

Ultimately, neither strategy—derision or conspiracy theory—worked. As the nascent Tea Party movement continues to wield political power, the new liberal press's effort to knock it down looks like a spectacular failure. The movement thrived on the negative attention from the left, which complemented the constant and shameless boosterism it received from right-wing media. The mainstream media, meanwhile, ignored liberal demands that it spend less time personalizing the Tea Party activists and more time investigating their funding.

I was acutely aware of the media's treatment of the Tea Partiers because I was one of the first reporters for a left-leaning publication to take the movement seriously. In January 2009 I had moved from the libertarian *Reason* magazine to a liberal start-up called The Washington Independent. Tasked with



**Grassroots** Liberals mocked Tea Party protests, like this one in Boston in April, but it only made the movement stronger.

covering “the re-making of the right,” I shadowed the young activists who organized the first Tea Party in Washington, D.C., on February 27, 2009.

There was no shortage of journalists available to cover the D.C. event. The annual Conservative Political Action Conference was under way a few miles up the road. But the reporters who ambled over to LaFayette Park came mostly from conservative outlets, such as *National Review* and *Investors’ Business Daily*. Pajamas TV sent its biggest celebrity, Joe “the Plumber” Wurzelbacher, who doubled as a speaker at the rally. His speech concerned the lack of me-

dia coverage that the protestors were getting. It sounded silly and self-negating, but it was basically correct. No one from the mainstream media took the event seriously enough to break from speeches by Newt Gingrich and Mitt Romney to witness a gathering of libertarians, Free Republic “freepers,” conservative columnists, and talk-radio fans who’d driven in for the day, all united to protest Keynesian economics and Barack Obama.

At first, I thought the Tea Partiers might be wasting their time. They’d spent eight years mocking the liberals who railed against the Bush administra-

tion. A banner-waving, slogan-shouting rally with jokes about tea bags? Why would anyone take this seriously? Standing at the rally, though, and then typing up my notes later, I began to realize that this coalescing of disparate strains of conservatism was something new, at least in the current political era, and also that it fit naturally into a long history of such grassroots movements, on both the left and the right. If the Tea Party is this generation’s “New Right,” as Chris Matthews declared, it echoes the New Right that emerged in the decades following World War II, culminating in Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980.

Plenty of liberal reporters now acknowledge that they were slow in taking the movement seriously. “It took me a little while to catch on,” says Adele Stan, the Washington editor of the liberal AlterNet, and a seasoned reporter on the conservative movement. “I saw it as a grassroots backlash but I didn’t see the growth of it coming. In the early stages there was a lot of ridicule, and I fell prey to that sometimes. When you’re seeing things through the prism of ridicule, you’re missing a larger, more important story.”

Others are less willing to concede the point. “Whether we didn’t take them seriously enough and what the impact will be remains to be seen,” says Ari Rabin-Havt, a strategist for MediaMatters, which relentlessly covered the slip-ups of pro-Tea Party Republicans. “But I remember things like one of the

attacks absolutely helped us,” says Eric Odom, a Republican activist named in the *Playboy* story. “Beyond the ‘tea bag’ stuff, look at the charge that we’re racist. The vast majority of this movement is not racist. When we hear things like that, we take it personally. We find it to be insulting and it makes us work even harder.”

Faiz Shakir, the editor of ThinkProgress, argues that the organization’s work—which included dispatching six reporters with cameras to Tea Parties where Republicans were speaking—forced the mainstream media to report on the fact that the movement was partisan. “In elite discourse, our reporting seems to have marginalized what the Tea Party movement was understood to be,” Shakir says. “By the end of the year they were understood to be partisan Republicans, not disgruntled moderates.”

None of this is to suggest that, had the left press attempted to engage the Tea Party in a debate of ideas and policies, it would have altered the movement’s trajectory. It’s more that, by attempting to dismiss it as something fundamentally unserious, or little more than the handiwork of rich GOP operatives, liberals stiffened the resolve of what is a genuine grassroots phenomenon. Tell someone they can’t do something and they will be determined to prove you wrong.

It was unreasonable for liberals to expect serious news outlets like the *Times* to batter the Tea Party instead of treating its leaders like new political stars. And the mainstream press was right to cover the Tea Party as a bold new movement whose emergence had important things to tell us about the country. Who funded the Tea Parties was a legitimate aspect of the story, but not the only or even the most important aspect. Libertarian groups and funders—the Koch Family Foundations in particular—had been sinking money into efforts to spark a small-government movement for decades. They had managed to launch some successful publications and think tanks, but had never produced a mass organization. The Tea Party is messy and unpolished; it has attracted people who differ vigorously on many issues. That is the stuff of a true grassroots movement, and liberal hopes that they could discredit it by digging up some receipts were folly.

Here’s the irony: liberals made inevitable the coverage in the mainstream media that so angered them. The institutions liberals built to challenge the GOP were, once Democrats were in power, more obsessed with attacking a perceived enemy than with building liberal projects. By late 2009, the Tea Party was all conservatives were talking about, and it was all liberals were talking about, too. The incumbent party and its ideological organs were strategizing on how to handle this insurgency—whether it was funded by billionaires didn’t really matter. Was the rest of the press supposed to ignore what had become a focal point of American politics? **CJR**

DAVID WEIGEL is a political reporter for *Slate*.

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## Liberals made inevitable the press coverage that so angered them. By late 2009, the Tea Party was all conservatives were talking about, and it was all liberals were talking about, too. What was the press supposed to do?

people at the big protest in Searchlight, Nevada, telling a reporter, ‘I would vote for a commie to vote out Obama.’ Some of this was extremely, laughably ignorant.”

The fact remains, though, that Tea Party leaders look back on this dismissive coverage with a kind of pride. The attacks by the left press convinced them that they were onto something, that they were irritating the right people. The most offensive attacks—when CNN’s Anderson Cooper and MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow referred to them as “teabaggers,” for instance—were met with demands for an apology. Attacks on the funding of the movement were brushed aside as partisan smears of a self-financed, grassroots uprising. “The

But even to the extent that mainstream press coverage eventually acknowledged the partisan nature of at least some strands of the Tea Party, the bulk of the coverage still focused on explaining the movement rather than debunking it. In December 2009, *The New York Times* assigned Kate Zernike to the conservative beat. Zernike ended up writing mostly explanatory stories about the movement, and quickly turned her coverage into a book, *Boiling Mad*, published by Times Books. Rick Berke, the *Times*’s national editor, dismisses the idea that the paper was too kind to Tea Partiers. “We’re just looking for the most ambitious storytelling we can find and this is what we’ve ended up with,” says Berke.

## Traffic Jam

*We'll never agree about online audience size*

MIAMI HAS DEEP TIES TO THE CARIBBEAN. SO WHEN A DEVASTATING EARTHQUAKE struck Haiti on January 12, *The Miami Herald* mobilized for one of its biggest stories of the year. Reporters were on a flight to the Dominican Republic that night and filing from Haiti the next day. The sense of mission extended to the paper's Web site, where a special Haiti channel pulled together print coverage as well as video pieces, photo archives, and Twitter feeds from correspondents. Multimedia editor Rick Hirsch thought his site could open a window onto the tragedy for audiences around the world. "Haiti really is a local story for us," he explains.

According to the *Herald's* server logs, his hunch was right: traffic leapt by more than a third in January, to 35 million page views, the only time it broke 30 million in the six months before or after. Nearly 5.9 million different people visited the site that month, another high-water mark for the year.

But not according to comScore, the media measurement firm that, along with rival Nielsen, purports to be the objective word on what Americans do online. ComScore recorded fewer than 9 million page views for the *Herald*, and barely 1.6 million "unique visitors." Even more distressing, comScore—whose clients include major advertisers and ad agencies—had the paper's page views actually *declining* by 40 percent the month of the earthquake. "Those trends just don't make sense," insists Hirsch, whose newspaper subscribes to comScore as well. "We know our traffic went through the roof."

THE OPEN SECRET OF ONLINE PUBLISHING IS THAT SUCH WILD DISCREPANCIES are routine. Whether you ask *The Washington Post* or a stand-alone site like Talking Points Memo (TPM), you'll hear the same refrain: publishers looking at their own server data (via software like Omniture or Google Analytics) always see much more traffic than is reported by Nielsen and comScore, both of which extrapolate a site's audience by tracking a small "panel" of Web users, just as Nielsen does for its famous TV ratings.

"The panel-based numbers are atrocious," says Kourosh Karimkhany, TPM's chief operating officer, pointing out that Nielsen and comScore have a hard time measuring workplace Web surfing. "But as long as they're equally inaccurate for our competitors, it's okay. It's something we live with."

For that matter, the two ratings firms frequently disagree with each other. In May, for example, Gannett's various properties commanded 37.5 million unique visitors according to comScore, but only 25.6 million according to Nielsen. ComScore gave Washingtonpost.com an audience of 17 million people that month,

but Nielsen recorded fewer than 10 million. And so on.

It's fair to ask how business gets done amid such uncertainty. Who should the site's sponsors—or for that matter, its journalists—believe?

Publishers say the cacophony scares away advertisers, a conclusion supported by a 2009 McKinsey & Company study commissioned by the Internet Advertising Bureau. Executives from Newser and MLB.com told *The Wall Street Journal's* "Numbers Guy" columnist last February that undercounting by Nielsen and comScore keeps them off the radar of major advertisers, and hurts their bottom lines.

This messy situation has yielded any number of white papers and task forces; reform efforts are currently under way at the IAB, the Media Ratings Council, and the Newspaper Association of America, among others. Last year CBS, NBC, and Disney led the formation of a "Coalition for Innovative Media Measurement," that seeks to establish a cross-platform standard to gauge total media usage.

In response, comScore has unveiled a new "hybrid" approach that claims to mash up panel results with server-side data for a more accurate count. This is a little ironic, since the *raison d'être* for the user panels is that server data can't be trusted because it counts computers, not people, who may visit a site from more than one machine. Whatever the technical merits, one comparison found the "hybrid" counts boost audiences by 30 percent on average; some sites, like The Onion, saw traffic nearly triple. Nielsen has a similar system in the works.

Does this mean that finally, after fifteen years of mounting chaos in online metrics, a single standard will take hold? That something like the relative clarity of TV ratings will be achieved? Don't bet on it. No trade group or task force can address the fundamental problem—if it is a problem—of counting online audiences: too much information.

THE "BANNER AD" WAS STANDARDIZED by the site HotWired in late 1994. The next step was obvious: HotWired began to report what share of people clicked on each banner, i.e. the "click-through rate," giving advertisers a new way to think about the impact of their campaigns.

That origin story goes a long way toward explaining the informational mayhem that afflicts online media today. Every visit to, say, Salon or Nytimes.com yields a blizzard of things to measure and count—not just “click-throughs” but “usage intensity,” “engagement time,” “interaction rates,” and of course “page views” and “unique visitors,” to name a few. How deep into the site do visitors go? How long to do they stay? Match any numerator to any denominator to make a new metric.

The statistics accumulate not only at the sites you visit, but also in the servers of every advertiser or “content partner” whose material loads on the same Web page. Any of these servers can attach a “cookie” to your browser to recognize when you visit other sites in the same editorial or advertising networks. Data at each tier can be collected and analyzed (thus, measurement firms like Quantcast and Hitwise pull traffic figures from ISPs to come up with their own audience figures).

The Web has been hailed as the most measurable medium ever, and it lives up to the hype. The mistake was to assume that everyone measuring everything would produce clarity. On the contrary, clear media standards emerge where there’s a *shortage* of real data about audiences.

Nothing illustrates this better than Nielsen’s TV ratings system, which has enjoyed a sixty-year reign despite persistent doubts about its methodology. The company has responded to some critics over the years, for instance by increasing the number of Nielsen households and relying less on error-prone viewer “diaries.” It can’t do much about the most serious charge, that the panel is not a truly random sample and thus fails a basic statistical requirement.

But Nielsen’s numbers are better than nothing at all, and that’s what radio or TV broadcasting offers: no way to detect whether 5,000 people tuned in, or 5 million. With nothing to go on, accuracy matters less than consensus—having an agreed-upon count, however flawed, as long as it skews all networks equally.

Print publications have more hard data—a newspaper knows how many copies it distributes, though not how many people actually read them. So pub-

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## The ability to measure everything has not brought clarity.

lishers rely on third-party auditors like the Audit Bureau of Circulations to certify the squishy “pass-along” multiples that magically transform a circulation of 192,000 at *The Miami Herald*, for instance, into a total “readership” of 534,000.

By comparison, computer networks are a paradise of audience surveillance. Why expect media outlets, agencies, and advertisers to abide by the gospel of one ratings firm, to only talk about one number, with so much lovely data pouring in from so many sources? “People use whatever numbers look good that month. It gives publishers some flexibility,” says Kate Downey, director of “audience analytics” at *The Wall Street Journal*, which subscribes to Nielsen, comScore, Omniture, and HitWise. “I think if everybody had the same numbers, we would hate that even more.”

THERE’S ANOTHER REASON FOR THE lack of consensus about audiences on the Web: the numbers don’t matter as much to advertisers. As any *Mad Men* fan knows, Nielsen’s TV ratings are a kind of currency on Madison Avenue. An extra point or two of penetration translates into millions of dollars over a season. That’s why plot lines peak and the news gets trashier during “Sweeps Week,” when local ad rates are set.

Not so online. In May, comScore gave Yahoo 34 million more unique visitors (167 million) than Nielsen did (133 million). But it probably won’t cost Yahoo a penny if everyone believes the lower number, because Yahoo isn’t selling its total reach. Instead, Yahoo and other sites sell “ad impressions,” or sometimes actual “clicks,” which tally up one by one. Every time a banner loads up in front of you, the advertiser owes a little more money.

Advertisers and agencies still use third-party ratings to plan their campaigns. And sites with demographically appealing audiences, like the *Times* and

the *Journal*, will flaunt those statistics to entice marketing departments. But this sort of planning is less decisive since advertisers can watch their campaigns play out live and make adjustments on the fly, based on which Web sites send more customers their way.

This is not to say that accuracy is passé. Some number of people was drawn to *The Miami Herald*’s Haiti coverage, and it would be helpful to know what that number is. “There are a lot of optional, high-cost, high-effort editorial projects a newspaper can choose to pursue,” says Rick Hirsch. “I wish I had the data to guide these editorial choices. Ironically, it’s still like being a traditional editor, making calls based on your gut instinct—you have more data, but it’s conflicting.”

One way through the morass is for publishers to learn to ignore the numbers they don’t trust. It seems inevitable that, over time, this will mean more emphasis on mining their own server stats. For the last year, the *Times*, Gawker, TPM, and other outlets have been testing a site-analysis tool called ChartBeat that focuses on the last fifteen *seconds* of activity at their sites: what people are reading, commenting on, searching for, linking to, and Twittering about. One startling revelation at TPM: almost all of the audience drops off before the halfway point of longer pieces. Such real-time diagnostics raises thorny journalistic questions, but it also makes monthly site rankings seem irrelevant.

And what about the clarity the industry yearns for? The only way to imbue an audience number with anything like the authority of the old TV ratings is with a new monopoly—if either Nielsen or comScore folds or, more likely, they merge. That kind of authority won’t mean greater accuracy, just less argument. Advertisers don’t need it, and Web sites shouldn’t want it. **CJR**

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LUCAS GRAVES is a Ph.D. candidate in communications at Columbia. This article was adapted from “Chaos Online: How Faulty Metrics Affect Digital Journalism,” a report written by Graves, John Kelly, and Marissa Gluck. It was commissioned by Columbia’s Graduate School of Journalism and funding for the research was provided by Mary Graham, a member of the school’s Board of Visitors. The full report is available at [www.journalism.columbia.edu/online/data](http://www.journalism.columbia.edu/online/data).

## All-Out Media War

*It's Clarín vs. the Kirchners, and journalism will be the loser*

ON JUNE 24, A STORY IN THE ARGENTINE DAILY CLARÍN REPORTED A BOMBHELL: a former ambassador, Eduardo Sadous, had privately testified to a congressional committee that the former president, Nestor Kirchner, knew about a web of corruption involving kickbacks in exchange for business deals with Venezuela. In return came a volley of epithets.

Kirchner called Hector Magnetto, the CEO of the Clarín Group, a “delinquent.” Anibal Fernandez, chief of staff for Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner—the former president’s wife and the current president—called him “perverse and shameless.” Magnetto, generally a publicity-shy executive, fired back in the newspaper.

It was just another day of verbal pyrotechnics in a two-year conflict pitting the Kirchners against the Clarín Group, Argentina’s media behemoth. With *Clarín* as its flagship, the group has holdings in radio and television, cable TV, Internet, newspapers, newsprint, and a news agency. Argentine pundits speculate endlessly about the stakes in the ugly conflict. But no matter which side eventually prevails, professional journalism will be the main casualty.

When Nestor Kirchner passed the presidential sash to his wife in December 2007, no one could have predicted that *Clarín* would soon become the Kirchners’ media *bête noire*. It was hardly Kirchner’s mouthpiece during his administration, but *Clarín* served up kid-glove treatment of administration policies. Unlike *La Nación* or the Perfil news group, *Clarín* didn’t frequently dredge up cases of wrongdoing. And *Clarín* columnists often received big scoops from the Kirchners’ inner circle. Presidential decisions, such as extending the period of television licenses and merging the largest cable systems, benefitted Clarín’s far-flung business interests. But the *Pax Clariniana* is over.

The Kirchners and *Clarín* parted ways in early 2008, when the Fernandez de Kirchner government was facing a countrywide revolt against a substantial tax increase on agricultural exports. Kirchneristas viewed *Clarín* as carrying water for powerful agribusiness interests, which were fueling protests that dominated headlines and brought the economy to a screeching halt. As in many dissolving marriages, the divorce wasn’t exactly civil. Irreconcilable differences were laid bare when President Fernandez de Kirchner accused *Clarín* of sending a “mafia-like message” when Hermenegildo Sabat, a respected cartoonist, drew her with an X across her lips, suggesting that she had been gagged.

Since then, the conflict has often reached a boiling point. *Clarín*, along with a group representing press owners, has condemned several events it interpreted as acts of official press intimidation. Pro-government groups, in turn, have dem-

onstrated in front of *Clarín*’s building several times. In September 2009, in a confusing episode that triggered much speculation, tax inspectors raided the newspaper’s offices.

In April 2010, the battle seemed to escalate. The city of Buenos Aires was plastered with anonymous billboards displaying pictures of the Clarín Group’s most prominent journalists, calling them lackeys for a media owner accused of “appropriating” children of people who had disappeared during the military dictatorship that ruled Argentina from 1976 and 1983, a terrible historical touchstone for Argentina. The billboards referred to Ernestina Herrera de Noble, Clarín Group’s majority shareholder and the widow of the newspaper’s founder.

The charge reflected the long-held conviction among human-rights groups, who have been strong Kirchner supporters, that the Noble Herrera children, thirty-four-year-old Marcela and Felipe, were born to parents who had been kidnapped and then murdered by the junta. The siblings were adopted in 1976, during the early days of the military dictatorship. The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a human-rights group that has helped identify and recover more than 100 children stolen from political prisoners during the dictatorship, is the plaintiff in a court order that required the Noble Herrera children to undergo DNA tests to determine their identity. The Kirchner camp insists that *Clarín* for years has used its power to prevent the DNA testing. Last December, Marcela and Felipe voluntarily submitted DNA samples to a forensic center that is under the oversight of the judiciary, but the samples have not been examined. They refused to be tested by the National Genetic Data Bank, which is under the executive branch, arguing that the results could be manipulated for political gain. In June, the issue gained wide visibility after the police raided their house and forced the siblings to hand over pieces of clothing to get DNA samples. When it was announced that their clothes contained DNA from different people, the rumor mill went into overdrive around the possibility of foul play.

Since the Kirchner-Clarín fight broke out, the government has taken actions unequivocally aimed at dam-

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aging Clarín's business. It convinced the national soccer association to take away Clarín's cable broadcasting rights and assign them to state-run Channel 7, which broadcasts over the air and does not require cable. Officials explained that the measure was intended to democratize citizens' rights to watch the popular sport. In a country where fútbol is big business, as well as a patriotic badge of honor, the decision was an act of political bravado. In contrast to most politicians' gentle handling of any matter affecting Clarín, which exerts unmatched influence in Argentine politics, the Kirchners have displayed unusual chutzpah. Such attitude was also evident in the government's decision to take over Papel Prensa, the national newsprint company in which the state, Clarín Group, and *La Nación* have been partners since the early 1970s.

The Kirchners' recent media "reform" effort is also inseparable from the conflict. President Fernandez de Kirchner sent a broadcasting bill to Congress in early 2009. Officials touted it as much-needed legislation to democratize broadcasting, by putting limits on cross-media ownership and securing a third of broadcasting licenses for community organizations. But even those who recognized the merits of the law believed the effort was driven by different goals, namely, to curb the Clarín Group's power and strengthen the official media apparatus. Although Congress passed the law in October 2009, provincial judges held it up. The Argentine Supreme Court revoked the suspension in June 2010, clearing the way for the law to take effect.

Tensions keep escalating. *Clarín* offers a daily dose of news critical of the administration. And the Kirchners frequently lambast "the media monopoly" and quip that the acronym TN of the Group's cable news channel *Todo Noticias* stands for "Todo Negativo"—"All Negative." In a phrase that has entered the vernacular, Nestor Kirchner taunted, "What is the matter, *Clarín*? Are you nervous?" to criticize what he portrays as deceptive and malicious news. Kirchneristas see the Clarín Group as a rattled powerhouse that has met its political match.

Clarín, in turn, a news company that rarely wears its politics on its sleeve, has pretty much abandoned balance. Its star

columnists see little but disaster in the Kirchners' policies and political style. The publication of the ambassador's kickback charges came in the wake of a series of stories rifling through the government's closets. Members of the Kirchners' political circle, including several cabinet members, are regular targets for exposés.

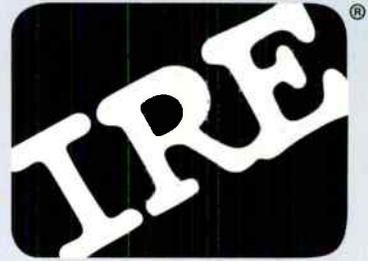
Unsurprisingly, the conflict has gripped the media themselves. Clarín's towering presence generates a range of opinions and emotions. Hardly anyone in an Argentine newsroom feels indifferent about the company. Scores of journalists, including many influential columnists, have worked in its newsrooms. Journalists have not simply been spectators in a gritty fistfight between two giants; they have been drawn in. The world of Argentine journalism is divided between "journalists K" (for the Kirchners) and "journalists anti-K." Old friends and colleagues on different sides of that fence no longer talk to each other. Some reporters with pro-Kirchner sympathies have left *Clarín* for news organizations identified with the administration. Name-calling often replaces reporting. News shows in state-run media regularly ambush columnists who criticize the government. Anti-Kirchner pundits frequently blast journalists who toe the official line. Old debates about "professional" versus "activist" journalism have been reopened.

As a result, the middle ground for journalism with nuance, distance, equanimity, evenhandedness, and even accuracy has narrowed. The lines are so firmly drawn that journalists couldn't even cross them for an issue that ought to unite them. When President Fernandez de Kirchner sent a bill to decriminalize injurious calumny against public officials in September 2009—a longtime demand of press organizations—K and anti-K journalists could not come together to support the measure. A divided journalism undermines dialogue and consensus building, two urgent needs in a democracy on a march toward polarized politics. **CJR**

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# The Hamster Wheel

*Why running as fast as we can is getting us nowhere*

BY DEAN STARKMAN

“Newsrooms have shrunk by 25% in three years.” —*Project for Excellence in Journalism, “State of the News Media 2010”*

“A large majority (75%) of editors said their story counts... had either increased or remained the same during the past three years.” —*PEJ, “The Changing Newsroom,” July 2008*

“We’re all wire service reporters now.” —*Theresa Agovino, Crain’s New York Business, at a conference of women real estate writers, December 2009*

“NBC’s chief White House correspondent, Chuck Todd, in a typical day does eight to sixteen standup interviews for NBC or MSNBC; hosts his new show, ‘The Daily Rundown’; appears regularly on ‘Today’ and ‘Morning Joe’; tweets or posts on his Facebook page eight to ten times; and composes three to five blog posts. ‘We’re all wire-service reporters now,’ he says.” —*Ken Auletta, The New Yorker, “Non-Stop News,” January 25, 2010*

“Everyone’s running around like rats.” —*a Wall Street Journal editor, June 21*

“The scoop has never had more significance to our professional users, for whom a few minutes, or even seconds, are a crucial advantage whose value has increased exponentially.” —*Robert Thomson, managing editor, The Wall Street Journal, in a memo to staff headlined “A Matter of Urgency,” sent May 19*

“Everybody has to be on the air every day. That makes a big difference.” —*Greg Guise, digital correspondent (cameraman), WUSA9-TV, Washington, D.C., June 2*

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer.” —*William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming”*

“When asked to cite the newsroom loss that hurt the most, one editor answered simply, ‘The concept of who and what we are.’” —*PEJ, “The Changing Newsroom”*

These are challenging times in the news business. We get that, even up here in the CJR commune. I am not here to argue against experimentation, keeping up with the Huffingtons, Mike Allenism, or any of that. I am not anti-speed. Speed is good. It’s why there’s a news business in the first place. It’s why the man *ran* the twenty-six miles from the battle of Marathon. It’s why journalism starts with *jour*, although now it should probably be called *heure*-nalism. So rest assured, your writer is pro-scoop, pro-working hard, pro-update, pro-competing-for-scrap-*s*-of-news-like-a-pack-of-wild-animals, pro-video, etc., type, type, pant, pant—*phew!* Sorry, for a second I thought I was on DealBook.

I’m also for quantity when it comes to news—more is more, I say. Even though our readers are all supposed to be super busy, so in theory it makes no sense—at all—to be *increasing* the volume of random items for these harried people to sort through. You’d think we’d be *decreasing* our volume, and making sure each thing offered to readers is really good. But, like I said, I’ve no problem with volume, in theory.

Also, I should go on record as being pro-productivity. I’m for squeezing every last ounce from every last lazy, lucky-to-have-a-job reporter. I’m an editor, too, you know. Reporters and their “but we need *time* to look into stuff”—*wah, wah*. Don’t they know we’re in deep kimchi? “We are in a tough, take-no-prisoners, leave-no-terminal-unturned competition around the world,” as Robert Thomson reminds his staff in the memo cited above. Bleedin’ crisis, this is.

But let’s think about this for a second. Stop. Think. We’re doing more with less, the numbers don’t lie. Fewer reporters and editors. More copy. What’s the bottom line? “The bottom line culturally is this,” PEJ said in that 2008 report:

In today’s newspapers, stories tend to be gathered faster and under greater pressure by a smaller, less experienced staff of reporters, then are passed more quickly through fewer, less experienced, editing hands on their way to publication.

Logic tells us something has to give. But what? Hmm. Well, we can rule out quality. You see, CJR Reader, the quality



of reporting and writing from major news organizations is better than ever—just ask senior news managers, as PEJ did in 2008:

Despite the cutbacks in staffing and space, by 54% vs. 32%, clear majorities of editors said the comprehensiveness of their news coverage had either significantly or somewhat improved... in the last three years. An overwhelming 94% of editors said their papers were as accurate or more accurate than three years ago. And a solid 56%, taking it all in, said the “overall quality of their news product is now better than it was before.”

Rupert Murdoch, quoted by Sarah Ellison in her new book, *War at the Wall Street Journal*, put a finer point on it when he compared his version of my old paper to earlier incarnations: “We produced a better paper. I’m sorry, but it’s as simple as that.”

Ah, well, the quality argument is not one that anybody’s going to win. You can’t actually measure journalism’s quality; that’s its tragic flaw and maybe saving grace. You can point to circulation or prizes, but journalism is more art than science. It’s why quantity will always have an advantage over quality. But qualitative comparisons, particularly between eras, are basically just an argument. Could Michael Jordan’s champion Bulls of the ’90s have beaten Larry Bird’s Celtics in their heyday? (Bad example; *of course* they could have, but the point is made.) One reader’s livelier news pages look to another reader like news A.D.D., an inability to choose *anything* so instead of trying to publish *everything*, all the time. Still, this lack of choosing is itself a choice. More on that later.

Put it this way, given limited resources, not all readers would think to assign seven (!) staffers to live blog the opening ceremonies of the Winter Olympics, as *The Wall Street Journal* did in February:

The preceremony starts, with instructions to the audience. As always in Canada, all explanations are in English and French.

But again, that’s just me. Perhaps there was nothing else to look into that night—in the whole world.

Without getting into whether newspapers are worse or better than before—let’s concede they’re fabulous; that’s why everyone loves them so much—we should pause for a second and think about the implications of the do-more-with-less meme that is sweeping the news business. I call it the Hamster Wheel.

The Hamster Wheel isn’t speed; it’s motion for motion’s sake. The Hamster Wheel is volume without thought. It is news panic, a lack of discipline, an inability to say no. It is copy produced to meet arbitrary productivity metrics (Bloomberg!). It is “Sheriff plans no car purchases in 2011,” (*Kokomo Tribune*, 7/5/10). It is “Ben Marter’s Home-Cooked Weekend,” (*Politico*, 6/28/10): “Saturday morning, he took some of the leftover broccoli, onions, and mushrooms, added jalapenos, and made omeletes for a zingy breakfast.” Ben Marter is communications director for a congresswoman. It’s live-blogging the opening ceremonies, matching stories that don’t matter, and fifty-five seconds of video of a movie

theater screen being built: “Wallingford cinema adding 3 screens (video),” (*New Haven Register*, 6/1/10).

But it’s more than just mindless volume. It’s a recalibration of the news calculus. Of the factors that affect the reporting of news, an underappreciated one is the risk/reward calculation that all professional reporters make when confronted with a story idea: How much time versus how much impact? This informal vetting system is surprisingly ruthless and ultimately efficient for one and all. The more time invested, the bigger the risk, but also the greater potential glory for the reporter, and the greater value to the public (can’t forget them!). Do you fly to Chicago to talk to that guy about that thing? Do you read that bankruptcy examiner’s report? Or do you do three things that are easier?

Journalists will tell you that where once newsroom incentives rewarded more deeply reported stories, now incentives skew toward work that can be turned around quickly and generate a bump in Web traffic. “You’re constantly looking for the next story like that,” says Zachary Roth, a former reporter for Talking Points Memo (and before that a CJR staff member). “The posts you end up pitching and writing are less likely to be investigative.”

None of this is written down anywhere, but it’s real. The Hamster Wheel, then, is investigations you will never see, good work left undone, public service not performed. It is the perceived imperative to churn out every story that might have been nice to have had, at some point, *maybe*, given unlimited resources, but that, given highly constrained news budgets, should be allowed to recede into history unrecorded—or unrecorded by you, even if it is recorded by a thousand others. How many readers really ask themselves, “I wonder why my site didn’t have that Lugar-urges-‘common sense’-in-new-farm-dust-trials story?” (AP, 8/9/10).

You say, “Why *not* have it?” I say, “Because it isn’t free.” The most underused words in the news business today: let’s pass on that.

The Hamster Wheel, really, is the mainstream media’s undoing, in real time, and they’re doing it to themselves. So before the Wheel spins completely off its axle, sending hamsters and wood chips flying, we should think about the Wheel, question the assumptions that underlie it, and recognize a few truths that emerge after painstaking analysis performed over a truly obscene amount of time:

### 1. The Wheel is real

“We give them three times as many things that are completely unimportant,” fumes a *Wall Street Journal* reporter. Clearly, this whiner is exaggerating—but not by much. According to a CJR tally using the Factiva database owned by the paper’s parent, News Corp., the *Journal*’s staff a decade or so ago produced stories at a rate of about 22,000 a year, all while doing epic, and shareholder-value-creating, work, like bringing the tobacco industry to heel. This year, the *Journal* staff produced almost as many stories—21,000—in the *first six months*. The hamster creep started in 2000, with a spike to 26,000, and story counts have risen more or less steadily since, topping out at 38,000 in 2008, dropping a bit last year, and resuming a record-setting pace this year. By the way, this

## Hamster Derby

Number of stories printed in *The Wall Street Journal*.



Source: Factiva

count does not include Web-only material, blogs, NewsHub, etc., which the staff also produces, so the figures in the chart above are conservative.

Meanwhile, the number of journalists producing those stories has shrunk. The International Association of Publishers' Employees Local 1096, which represents a substantial part of the newsroom (though probably less than half; it doesn't count staff outside the U.S. and Canada, or editors above a certain level, for instance) says the number of its covered *Journal* staffers dropped 13 percent, from 323 in 2000 to 281 in 2008. (A *Wall Street Journal* spokeswoman declined to provide a headcount; a News Corp. reorganization last year blurred the distinction between wsJ staff and the company's wire reporters.) Story production in the same period rose 46 percent. The decline in unionized reporters in that period can be fairly extrapolated to the broader newsroom. So given the rise in story count, output jumped 69 percent per IAPE staffer (though others, mostly Dow Jones newswire reporters, would have contributed to the *Journal's* total story count). It's enough to make a chicken-processing-plant manager proud. But in the news business, as in the chicken business, there is a point of diminishing returns, and we passed it around 2002. This is basic physics: more stories divided by less staff equals scrawnier chickens. Respectfully, Mr. Murdoch, you are wrong—but you aren't alone.

This is not to say the Wheel is universal, even within organizations. The *Journal* let its reporters go deep with its recent Internet-privacy series, and has been rewarded with Pulitzer-caliber work. Clearly, some reporters still have time to make a phone call before they tweet. And that suggests rule no. 2.

## 2. The Wheel is not inevitable

The Internet, we know, is the greatest invention since the Twinkie. It allows us to publish any time, all the time. But that doesn't mean we have to. Given that the news business has lost an estimated 15,000 journalists since 2000, it does not directly follow to go from "we're facing a serious transformation in our industry" to "let's write as much as possible as fast as we can." It's not hard to understand the impulse

to do more with less. Hamsterism is a natural reaction to a novel set of conditions—a collapsing model, a new paradigm, a cacophony of new voices, fewer people filling an infinite hole. And through the haze we can glimpse an online model that equates Web traffic with advertising dollars, though as we'll see, the connection is far from clear.

But newspapers aren't wire services, and wires aren't blogs. News organizations must change with the times, but nowhere is it written in *Newsonomics* (or whatever thrown-together, authoritative-sounding book is being read like Torah by news managers these days) that news organizations should drift away from core values, starting with the core of core—investigations and reporting in the public interest. These are not just "part of the mix." They are a mindset, a doctrine, an organizing value around which healthy news cultures are created, the point.

In a report this year, PEJ cites editors at the Milwaukee *Journal Sentinel* and *The Boston Globe*, who recognize the problem and explicitly reject Wheel-like thinking. PEJ quotes *Globe* editor Martin Baron acknowledging that there may be less content in the paper, "but it is vetted to be unique and enterprising," of higher interest and higher impact. Exactly. So let's recognize the Wheel for what it is: a choice.

## 3. The Wheel infantilizes reporters, strengthens P.R.

This is just logic. If reporters lack the time to gather, analyze, and reflect on information, then they will have less leverage to confront the institutions on their beat.

And make no mistake, we are living in a time of P.R. ascendance. In their recent book, *The Death and Life of American Journalism*, Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols estimate that, even in the 1970s, when newspapers were in their heyday, the percentage of news generated from press releases was in the 40 percent to 50 percent range, a fair-enough guess. Since then, while journalism has withered, P.R. has bloomed like a rash. The authors document that in 1980, the ratio of P.R. people to news reporters was manageable, about 0.45 P.R. specialists and managers per 100,000 population to about 0.36 journalists. Today, P.R. towers over journalism, with 0.90 pros per 100,000 to just 0.25 journalists.

In Ken Auletta's *New Yorker* piece, cited above, White House officials expressed dismay at how little time reporters have to talk to them. "Everything is rushed," Auletta writes, and quotes then White House Communications Director Anita Dunn. "When journalists call you to discuss a story, it's not because they're interested in having a discussion. They're interested in a response. And the need to file five times a day encourages this." It encourages leaning on P.R., too.

A sense of empowerment comes through in the tone of P.R. professionals. When Mark Pittman, Bloomberg's late, great investigative reporter, asked for information on where the AIG bailout money went, here was the response:

Treasury spokeswoman Brookly McLaughlin said, "The Fed had the lead on this one: It's their loan. I don't know how I could be more clear."

*Why are you bothering us about a few dozen billion unprecedented secret U.S. government bailout dollars?*

"[Y]ou should call AIG," said Fed spokesman Calvin Mitchell. "I doubt that we will be talking about AIG's CDO portfolio."

*Run along, big fella.*

As it happens, Pittman, and *The New York Times's* Gretchen Morgenson a couple of days earlier, revealed the recipients of that bailout money: Goldman Sachs and other Wall Street investment banks. But Pittman and Morgenson aren't on the Wheel. They are arguments against the Wheel. This leads to Hamster Rule 4, or what I like to call "The Paradox of the Wheel."

#### **4. The Wheel never sets the news agenda, it only responds to the agendas of others**

The Paradox of the Wheel is that, for all the activity it generates, the Wheel renders news organizations deeply passive. The greater the need for copy, the more dependent reporters are on sources for scoops and pitiful scraps of news. In a 2000 study in the British academic journal *Journalism*, researchers analyzed news articles about a hostile takeover that would involve a massive restructuring in the hotel and leisure business to demonstrate that almost everything printed about the event was drawn from competing P.R. campaigns aimed at a few institutional shareholders, while the interests of individual shareholders, 80,000 employees, millions of customers, and British taxpayers (big tax subsidies were involved) were ignored. The press was, in effect, "captured" on a Hamster Wheel of press campaigns. The author, Aeron Davis, made the commonsense observation that P.R. dominance "worked to block unwelcome mainstream coverage, exclude non-corporate voices, and helped to define the boundaries of corporate 'elite discourse networks.'"

In other words, if news organizations don't set the agenda, someone else will.

#### **5. The Wheel isn't free**

The costs are in literate prose, proven premises, news that did not originate from an institution, and other airy-fairy things that build credibility and value over the long term. This is about resource allocation. Back in the Pleistocene Era, 2003, *The Wall Street Journal's* Daniel Golden convinced someone to allow him to review a 1998 document of sensitive academic information from the Groton School, the tony boarding school in Massachusetts. It revealed that one Margaret Bass, who was the only one of nine Groton applicants to get into Stanford that year, actually had an SAT score—1220—that was considerably lower than seven of the eight other students from her class who unsuccessfully applied to Stanford. Golden explained:

But Ms. Bass had an edge: Her father, Texas tycoon Robert Bass, was chairman of Stanford's board and had given \$25 million to the university in 1992. Mr. Bass has a degree from the Stanford Graduate School of Business. He and his wife, Anne, are both Groton trustees.

Groton's headmaster told Golden that the document was not an "official school record." So how did Golden know it was accurate? He called twenty other students whose information was in the document. The story was part of a series

that won a Pulitzer, but more importantly, it changed perceptions about affirmative action.

The Wheel doesn't do that. It's worth noting that Golden's Pulitzer wasn't for investigation, but for beat reporting.

#### **6. The Wheel pays the bills—or does it?**

Sure, you need clicks. Yes, you should update. And of course you need to be on the news. But it is understatement to say that new financial models of digital journalism are still being worked out, and that no one knows which ones will endure. Consider that even the science of measuring Web traffic is still in its infancy. In May, competing measurement firms, Nielson NetRatings and comScore, measured Yahoo's traffic and differed by 34 million readers, as a new study by Ph.D. students here at Columbia's journalism school explains. And getting from clicks to dollars involves another set of calculations. "Everybody wants traffic," Lucas Graves, one of the study's authors, told me. "But the ways it translates into dollars are very complex and rarely direct." (Graves's piece, based on the study, is on page 17.) The great hope for the Web future, *The Huffington Post*, still only manages to generate revenue amounting to \$1 per reader per year, according to a recent piece in *Newsweek*. It's nothing to sneeze at, but the site's editorial formula—which involves search-engine optimization up the wazoo—is controversial, to say the least, and the revenue figures are still relatively small.

Finally, self-styled newsroom "realists," those who believe that life is one long twilight struggle for page views, may already be fighting the last war. In *CJR's* July/August issue, our science editor, Curtis Brainard (and, yes, that's the name of our science editor; *CJR* wanted me to change mine to "Malcolm Bucksworth" but I refused), makes a convincing case that mobile devices, with their apps and other paid subscription schemes, offer journalism its best hope to make money in a digital age. Brainard says these mobile-device strategies focus on a curated news experience and deep reader engagement and will involve a whole new series of metrics.

The point is that it may be true that there is money in cranking out sixty-three-word briefs like, "Microwave Sparks Fire, Kills Dog" ([Washingtonpost.com](http://Washingtonpost.com), 8/9/10), but you'd have to prove it. No one has.

SO TO ALL YOU EDITORS LAYING OFF YOUR BEST STORY-tellers, rewarding quick hits, and letting your investigative assets wither, I say this: you will be sorry. For the rest of us, the Hamster Wheel's logical conclusion is Demand Media, the world's leading hamster-powered content farm, which employs 7,000 freelancers, produces 4,500 items every day, uses algorithms to figure out what to write, has passed *The New York Times* in traffic, and has just filed for an IPO. It publishes some stuff—"How To Make a Festivus Pole," "How To Choose Bondage Videos"—that is literally incredible.

Demand Media lives by a six-point "manifesto" that ends with an appropriate dictum: "Never rest." **CJR**

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# A Rocket's Trajectory

Marcus Brauchli at The Washington Post

BY SCOTT SHERMAN

For more than thirty years, Keith Richburg has been a classy and distinguished presence at *The Washington Post*. Richburg served as bureau chief in Manila, Nairobi, and Paris, and also spent more than two years as foreign editor in Washington. One assignment had eluded him at the *Post*: New York bureau chief, a job that he finally obtained in late 2007. He never finished out his term. Last November, two days before Thanksgiving, Marcus

Brauchli, the *Post*'s executive editor, walked into the New York bureau and shut it down. Brauchli was dressed in a tuxedo: his next stop that evening would be the Grand Ballroom of the Waldorf-Astoria, for the annual fundraising dinner for the Committee to Protect Journalists. *Post* reporter Karl Vick, who was in the bureau when Brauchli appeared, recalls: "Essentially Marcus said, 'I'm dressed like an undertaker for a reason. I'm bearing bad news.'"

When I recently talked to Richburg, he was still somewhat surprised, but not bitter, about the demise of the New York bureau. (The *Post*, in the same week, also liquidated its bureaus in Chicago and Los Angeles.) "Nobody saw it coming," said Richburg, who is now based in China for the *Post*. "I'm not sure Marcus saw it coming. We had just moved into new offices with *Newsweek*." If the *Post*'s management wanted to close the trio of national bureaus, why couldn't the bureau chiefs stay in those cities and work from home?

"All of the bureau chiefs recommended the same thing," said Richburg.

But Richburg had a chance to report from New York again, after all. He flew back to the city on May 1—the same day Faisal Shahzad tried to detonate a car bomb in Times Square. Richburg went to work immediately to assist the *Post* in coverage of that story. He is not unaware of the irony: "I was back to close down the bureau and clean out my apartment when a big story happened there."

For years, the *Post*'s three national bureaus have produced vibrant and original journalism, and closing them was not something Brauchli was eager to do. Richburg recalls him saying: "I might regret that if something major happened there." But it is Brauchli's fate to be a newspaper editor in a time of diminished expectations and resources for journalism, and luck has not always been with him. He started in the basement of Dow Jones, and, twenty-three years later, clawed his way to the managing editor's job at *The Wall Street Journal*—only to then find himself face to face with Rupert Murdoch.

He lasted eight months under Murdoch, who pushed him out in April 2008. Brauchli rebounded with impressive speed: three months later he was named executive editor of the *Post*—a job that, for forty years, had been held by only two men: Ben Bradlee and Leonard Downie Jr. But the newspaper that Brauchli joined is not the same *Washington Post* that James Fallows evoked in a 1976 *Esquire* profile of Bradlee—"the most exciting paper to work on, the most interesting one to read, and the

one from which wrongdoers had most to fear." Rather, it's a news organization that has lost a staggering amount of money in recent years; that has endured four waves of buyouts; that was unnerved by a scandal unleashed by its forty-four-year-old publisher, Katharine Weymouth; and that, like many journalism outfits, is enduring an existential crisis about its future. The *Post*'s journalism can still be formidable—as evidenced by its "Top Secret America" investigation in July, and its impressive coverage of the BP oil spill—but it has diminished in reach and, some argue, quality. A former *Post* business reporter says: "Brauchli inherited something that was already adrift and in decline."

Some longtime readers are worried. A year ago James Fallows returned to Washington after three years in China. The bundle on his doorstep left him dismayed: "I've thought of the *Post* as my hometown paper for years," he wrote, "and feel as if I've come back to see a family member looking sud-



**Big job** Marcus Brauchli is trying to reinvent a legendary newspaper in difficult times.

denly very ill.” “It’s not as good as it was,” says Charles Peters, the longtime editor of *The Washington Monthly*. “I attribute this to the loss of so many good reporters. There is much less original reporting than there was. There is less to read. It’s a faster read. You have to depend more on *The New York Times* than you did before.” Seymour Hersh says: “We all worry about the survival of the *Post*.”

Bradlee and Downie presided over a *Post* that, for the most part, was quite profitable. Brauchli is not so fortunate:

he wasn’t hired to expand the *Post*, but to shrink it. He knows the odds he is up against: “I’m taking a lot of arrows in the back now, and it’s okay,” he told longtime *Post* political editor Maralee Schwartz in March 2009. “In a year this is going to be a better place.” His mandate is to remake one of our legendary newspapers for a radically different era. And he must do that under the shadow of two great editors and with far fewer resources than they had. He must commandeer a smaller, faster vessel while forestalling a mutiny among the crew. That crew is not on the verge of insurrection, but neither is it enamored of its skipper.

ON A SWELTERING FRIDAY IN EARLY June, I sat down for two hours of conversation with Brauchli in his spacious office at the *Post*, which overlooks a sleek and newly rebuilt newsroom. On the day I visited, the newsroom was as hushed as an insurance office, and I was struck by how young the staff was; I saw few people who looked older than fifty. (*Post* spokeswoman Kris Coratti won’t say how many employees have taken buyouts in recent years. But in his new book *Morning Miracle*, a shaggy obituary for the old *Post*, Dave Kindred writes that nearly four hundred newsroom staff members have exited.) Brauchli is tall and lanky, with a receding hairline and a tight smile. He wore an ordinary blue suit and a cranberry-colored tie. I thought of Philip Marlowe’s description of his friend Bernie Ohls in Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*: “He looked like anybody you would pass on the street.”

Brauchli did not allow me to examine the postcards and personal items pinned above his desk. He also discouraged me from looking at the books on his shelf, although I did see a copy of T.S. Eliot’s *Selected Poems*, which someone recently sent to him. He had scribbled some notes on a legal pad, and he began to explain to me why the *Post* is “in a good position to succeed.” He listed the reasons: a highly affluent, internationally-minded readership; high market penetration for the print edition; a large digital audience. He added: “The *Post* has a very smart and defensible strategy—both journalistically and economically—which is one that Katharine has really honed in the

MARC BRYAN-BROWN / WIREIMAGE / GETTY IMAGES

last year: to be the indispensable guide to Washington, really to be for and about Washington.”

But getting Brauchli to provide direct answers to my questions was a bit like pulling water from a dry well. When he did offer detailed responses, it was, by and large, in the style of a cagey public relations officer. How much money has he been forced to cut from the news budget? (“I don’t think we would want to discuss specifics on how much money we’ve cut from the news budget or the size of the news budget.”) Instead of abandoning New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, why didn’t the *Post* allow the bureau chiefs to work at home? (“Our feeling was that we can cover the news that matters most to our readers by sending reporters out from Washington, as we have always done for much of our national coverage, without needing people based in those cities.”) How does the newsroom culture of *The Washington Post* differ from the newsroom culture of *The Wall Street Journal*? (“Newsrooms have a lot of common DNA,” he said, before launching into a windy disquisition on how the two newspapers have very different readerships, which wasn’t my question.)

Brauchli was somewhat more relaxed and animated in the second hour of our chat, when we discussed his family background, his early years in journalism, his Nieman fellowship at Harvard, and his arrival at Dow Jones. Previously I had asked him for the dozen articles, written from abroad, of which he remains most proud. As we stood up, he gave me a stack of fifty-three articles.

Two weeks later, after I had written to Brauchli to inquire about scheduling additional time to talk about various matters—his clips, his rise at the *Journal*, his path to the managing editor job, and the trauma of the Murdoch takeover—he called to say that he did not wish to speak about his twenty-three years at Dow Jones. “It’s an era that has been amply described,” he said. He repeated what he’d said, this time with more emphasis, as if addressing a child: “*It’s an era that has been amply described.*”

MARCUS WALKER BRAUCHLI WAS BORN IN 1961 IN BOULDER, Colorado. His maternal grandfather owned the *Huntington Herald Dispatch & Advertiser* in Huntington, West Virginia; Marcus never had any contact with the paper. His paternal grandfather, a Swiss immigrant, was a geologist who worked for an oil company in Oklahoma. His father, Christopher, is a lawyer in Boulder who writes political commentaries that appear regularly on *The Huffington Post* and *Counterpunch*. His mother, Margot, is active in the Colorado arts scene. He is married to Maggie Farley, a former reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, and they have two young daughters.

Brauchli’s interest in journalism sprouted early. By the tenth grade he was already writing and taking pictures for a weekly newspaper in Boulder. At Columbia University, where he arrived in 1979, he gravitated toward the *Columbia Spectator*, and became a stringer and contributor to *The New York Times* while still an undergraduate. In 1982, he worked briefly as a copyboy at the *Times*. But the young Brauchli set his sights on *The Wall Street Journal*, and in 1984, he

was hired as a Hong Kong correspondent for the AP-Dow Jones news service; his beat included Taiwan, China, and the Philippines. His bosses were immediately impressed: “He seemed like a really fine breed of hunting dog who was on the hunt,” says Rusty Todd, who edited Brauchli in Hong Kong. “I don’t want to blow too much smoke up his ass, but he seemed really eager to learn.” Brauchli became the *Journal*’s Tokyo correspondent in 1988, and landed the post of China bureau chief in 1995. Along with some friends, he launched a nightclub in Shanghai called Park 97 that, in his words, “became very trendy, especially so after I left China and stopped loitering around the back tables in the lounge.”

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**The *Post* is “not as good as it was,” says Charles Peters. “I attribute this to the loss of so many good reporters. There is less original reporting. There is less to read.”**

I asked Paul Steiger, the *Journal*’s longtime managing editor who now oversees ProPublica, where Brauchli ranked in the pantheon of *Journal* foreign correspondents. Steiger replied that he was not in the highest class—a class that included Tony Horwitz, Geraldine Brooks, Andrew Higgins, and Ian Johnson. “I wouldn’t put Marcus at that level,” Steiger said. Rather, he was in “the top ten percent.” Steiger is full of praise for Brauchli, recalling that, in 1991, when Marcus was on his way to Harvard to begin his Nieman fellowship, he asked him to go to Pakistan to do some reporting on a huge banking scandal involving the Bank of Credit & Commerce International, or BCCI. “In a very short space of time, he did three or four just terrific stories, both on his own and in collaboration with other people.” Adds Steiger: “He was a charismatic star reporter who could do everything from politics to heavy finance. And cultural stuff, too.”

His finest reportage chronicled patronage and instability in Benazir Bhutto’s Pakistan, illegal logging in the Philippine rain forests, and the World Bank’s cozy relationship with the Indonesian dictator Suharto. But at least one of his clips makes for uncomfortable reading in hindsight. On April 27, 1995, Brauchli wrote a page-one story for the *Journal* that chronicled Enron’s plan to establish power plants in India. The article, datelined Guahar, India, began: “High

on a remote volcanic bluff overlooking the Arabian Sea here, a U.S. group is carving out a more modern future for India. Not everybody is ready for it." In Brauchli's upbeat narrative, Enron executives were depicted as bright-eyed, well-intentioned entrepreneurs, while Indian politicians and activists who asked pointed questions about Enron, which would be exposed as a criminal syndicate in 2001, come off as stuffy bureaucrats and backward-looking nationalists. (Oddly, Brauchli included the Enron piece in the pile he gave to me.)

MANY PEOPLE INTERVIEWED FOR THIS PROFILE NOTED Brauchli's considerable intelligence—and his colossal ambition. Byron Calame, who spent thirty-nine years at the *Journal*, where he held a range of positions that included deputy managing editor before becoming the second public editor of *The New York Times*, calls him "a very sophisticated journalist. A very sophisticated global thinker." Those qualities, combined with his swift rise through the ranks, earned him a nickname at the *Journal*—"the Rocket." In her fine new book, *War at The Wall Street Journal*, which informs the paragraphs that follow concerning Brauchli and the *Journal*, Sarah Ellison calls Brauchli "a master manipulator of newsroom politics" at Dow Jones. His sharp elbows and acerbic tongue facilitated his rise. "Marcus was go, go, go, go," says Calame. "Marcus was feisty. Marcus could be way too political and competitive, and had a tendency to single out his competitors and make it personal." Calame remarked to a colleague in the late 1990s, when Brauchli was getting ready to take up the post of national editor: "I'm tired of Marcus coming into my office and running people down."

But Brauchli was climbing a tree whose roots were weakening and whose branches were beginning to decay: Dow Jones's profits plunged in the years after 2001. On April 17, 2007, he received two momentous pieces of information: his colleague Nikhil Deogun, who was taking over the *Journal's* Money & Investing section, informed him that Murdoch had just made his bid for Dow Jones. (Brauchli and Deogun did not break the story; CNBC reported it first.) The same afternoon, Brauchli learned from *Journal* publisher Gordon Crovitz that he would succeed Paul Steiger as managing editor.

It was strange luck. For two decades Brauchli had painstakingly constructed an ordered universe in his professional life, but Murdoch's arrival at Dow Jones plunged him into months of stress and uncertainty. Brauchli's core predicament was that in Murdoch's eyes he embodied the values of the old *Wall Street Journal*. Murdoch had contempt for some of those values—starting with the paper's emphasis on finely crafted feature writing and long-form narrative journalism built on thorough, time-consuming reporting. Sarah Ellison writes that shortly after News Corp.'s bid for Dow Jones became public information, Brauchli lamented to a friend: "I work my whole career to get this job and now I'm working for Murdoch?"

Did Brauchli ever consider resigning when Murdoch took over? His friends say no. Instead, he committed himself to

**Brauchli knew that Murdoch brandished the scalps of editors and publishers whom he vanquished, but he believed he would be the exception to the rule.**

working with Murdoch in the hope that he could achieve a convergence between his interests and Murdoch's—that is to say, a *Journal* that was faster and more news-oriented, but still imbued with the old values. We'll never know how far Brauchli might have gone to satisfy Murdoch's ordinances at the *Journal*. Ellison writes: He "spent hours with Murdoch, attempting to charm him." A seasoned media reporter who observed Murdoch's conquest of the *Journal* takes a less charitable view: "Brauchli stuck his nose up Murdoch's ass."

Brauchli knew that the Australian press lord brandished the scalps of editors and publishers whom he vanquished: Dorothy Schiff, Harold Evans, Clay Felker, and many others. But his friends unanimously agree that Brauchli, who has always been an indefatigable networker and social animal, thought he would be the exception to the rule; he believed he could seduce Murdoch. People close to Brauchli also speculate that Murdoch's confidant, Robert Thomson—with whom Brauchli had an edgy, competitive friendship, the contours of which are nicely captured by Ellison—led Marcus to believe he had a realistic chance of survival under the News Corp. regime.

That was an illusion. Brauchli resigned under pressure in April 2008. That Murdoch would expel the editor was precisely what certain members of the Bancroft family had feared. That is why, as a condition of the sale, they had insisted that the media baron accept a five-person "Special Committee," whose members were given, through a legal document filed with the SEC, "rights of approval" over the hiring or removal of the *Journal's* managing editor. (Brauchli himself played a major role in drafting the editorial independence agreement that established the special committee.) But as Dean Starkman wrote on The Audit, CJR's online business desk: "The agreement... was flawed in that it anticipated, if not actually required that the *Journal's* managing editor would want to protect his or her autonomy, at least enough to file a complaint." Brauchli chose not to file a complaint. The committee first received the news of Brauchli's ouster from Murdoch himself. In a phone call to one committee member, Murdoch purred that Brauchli is "a very nice fellow. It's all been done in a very civilized way. Thanks so much. Not at all.

Bye.” Brauchli left Dow Jones with \$6.4 million, a package negotiated by Bill Clinton’s lawyer, Robert Barnett.

Why didn’t Brauchli file a complaint with the committee? Brauchli has said that he interpreted the purpose of the committee as protecting the integrity of the paper, and as he told *The Washington Post* (July 8, 2008): “I never saw any evidence that the owners had tried to impose ideological and commercial agendas on the news coverage.” He went on to say: “What was important was the *Journal*, not me—that the editorial integrity be preserved, not that my job be preserved. Fighting for my job would have been mostly selfish and undermined the fight to maintain quality journalism.”

Not all of his colleagues shared that view. A veteran *Journal* reporter says: “When Marcus finally did resign, and left with his wheelbarrow of money, it was not a resignation like Jay Harris’s in San Jose. [In 2001, Harris resigned from the *San Jose Mercury News*, rather than implement draconian cuts ordered by Knight Ridder.] A lot of people at the *Journal* noticed that. There was no statement of principle from Marcus. There was disquiet in some sectors of the newsroom.”

After he was forced out as managing editor, Brauchli worked for three months as a consultant to News Corp. He says: “I was helping to think through how they might do business media in Asia.” Notes Keith Richburg: “I remember Marcus saying during that period: ‘the great thing about working for Murdoch is you walk into these places in India and China and people see you in a way they don’t want to see you when you are going out as a correspondent.’” Concludes Richburg: “If the *Post* job hadn’t come along, he’d probably be some top assistant to Murdoch on Asia.” Brauchli’s old friend Stuart Karle urged him to embrace the private sector: “I told Marcus he should go work for Goldman Sachs in China. He’d make himself a pile of money. The guy knows everyone in China. He loves journalism enough to stay in it.”

THE WASHINGTON, D.C., AREA, DON GRAHAM TOLD ME WITH satisfaction in 2002, is “a hell of an area to publish a newspaper in.” (See “Stability: Don Graham’s *Washington Post*,” *CJR*, September/October 2002). But the good times didn’t last: the Post Company’s annual report for 2007 highlighted a significant drop in classified advertising, and noted: “the newspaper business is slipping.” The newspaper division posted an operating loss of \$193 million in 2008, and \$164 million in 2009. Daily circulation of the print edition is now about 556,000, down from 830,000 in 1994. Today, the *Post* employs fifteen full-time foreign correspondents, down from twenty-four in 2001. These days, Graham lives with the words of his grandfather, Eugene Meyer, which are inscribed in the lobby of the *Post*: “In the pursuit of truth, the newspaper shall be prepared to make sacrifices of its material fortunes, if such course be necessary for the public good.”

The *Post*’s financial distress cast a shadow over the race to succeed executive editor Leonard Downie, who was installed by Don Graham in 1991. When Katharine Weymouth became publisher of the *Post* in 2008, she decreed that Downie’s time was up. Today, many people at the *Post* contend that Downie “bungled the succession”—as if Downie was not an

employee of a public company, but an African dictator who could name his successor. Walter Pincus, a longtime *Post* reporter and a consultant to The Washington Post Company, speaks for a number of his colleagues when he says: “Downie had made sure there was no successor, because he didn’t want to leave.”

The leading internal candidate for the executive editor’s job was managing editor Philip Bennett, who embodied many of the paper’s best values and who maintained an ambitious conception of journalism’s possibilities. Bennett’s detractors faulted him for lackluster communication skills, and accused him of playing favorites in the newsroom. Pincus says: “I think Katharine felt she gave Phil a chance, but he was not a leader.” Several *Post* veterans told me that Bennett would have pushed back aggressively against some of Weymouth’s edicts. In the end, Weymouth chose a man with no institutional history at the paper, and with no work experience in Washington.

In a recent interview, Weymouth explained why she chose Brauchli: “He had all the qualities I was looking for. He has serious journalistic chops. He was already at a great newspaper. He was running an integrated (print and online) newsroom. He has a great news sense as well as a business sense. He has a good dose of charisma as well.”

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**In the newsroom, it is unclear what the new *Post* strategy—“about Washington, for Washingtonians, and those affected by it”—actually means.**

Brauchli was hired in July 2008. The previous month, Weymouth had given an interview to *Advertising Age*, in which she affirmed that she needed a cost-cutter: “To the extent that we need to effect change either in our structure or our head count, I think you need people who can do that effectively, without overly demoralizing the staff or hurting the product that we put out in print or online.” In December 2008, Weymouth sent a memo to the staff that outlined a “principal pillar” of the *Post*’s strategy in a time of “scarce resources”: “Being about Washington, for Washingtonians, and those affected by it.” *Post* staffers are still debating Weymouth’s memo, and some are confused by what “being about Washington” actually means. “Why on earth is the *Washington Post* covering everything from a Beltway perspective?”

asks one experienced *Post* reporter. Others assert that the *Post* was *always* for and about Washington, and that Weymouth's credo is simply a rhetorical device to justify a smaller cost structure. Says Weymouth: "We had to have a strategy. We had to have a sense of what makes us unique, and without that I don't think you have anything."

IF BRAUCHLI'S FINANCIAL RESOURCES WERE EQUAL TO Bradlee's and Downie's, his *Post* might well resemble theirs. But it was his misfortune to join the *Post* a week before the collapse of Lehman Brothers. Says former *Post* foreign editor David Hoffman: "The recession blew a big hole in the newspaper's revenues, which led to pressure to reduce fixed costs, especially personnel." He faced other challenges as well. Notes Bill Keller, executive editor of *The New York Times*: "Moving into the top job as an outsider is a daunting challenge in any institution, especially one with a culture as intense and complicated and political as that of a big-city newsroom."

Brauchli had a mandate to integrate the paper's print and digital operations; the latter was located in Arlington, Virginia. The merger was long overdue. Managing editor Raju Narisetti, who joined the *Post* eighteen months ago after launching *Mint*, a first-rate business newspaper in India, explains: "We were five years too late in combining both news organizations. And that was a mistake." He adds: "*The Washington Post* site was a phenomenal site ten years ago. I think we were somewhat complacent. It lost ground in terms of design, technology, innovation, ease of use."

As part of the integration process, Narisetti is overseeing the installation of a new computer system that can seamlessly merge print and online content. Brauchli also created a universal news desk, the goal of which is to move content to multiple platforms as rapidly as possible. Indeed, modernizing the *Post*'s technical infrastructure has been a crucial aspect of Brauchli's tenure (though *Post* staffers still complain about second-rate computer equipment). Brauchli takes credit for "integrating two newsrooms in a way that has both eliminated redundancy and improved our agility, ensuring that Washingtonpost.com and its digital cousins on mobile devices are as competitive as any news site out there on breaking news."

I asked Narisetti to delineate the principal objective of the current regime. He says: "To take a print-centric newsroom of eight hundred people, give or take, and transform it into a smaller, but much more multimedia-centric, newsroom." ("About six hundred" is how Brauchli describes the current size of the newsroom.) Narisetti believes that he and Brauchli have come close to accomplishing their mission. But a price has been paid: as part of the integration process, some of the most talented people associated with the Web site, starting with Jim Brady, executive editor of Washingtonpost.com, moved on; Brady felt there was no place for him in Brauchli's integrated newsroom. (Brady now works for the Allbritton-owned TBD.com, which competes against the *Post* on local news). Moreover, Brauchli had the newsroom redesigned, which resulted in months of hassles and headaches for *Post* staffers, who were forced to flee their normal workspaces.

Newsroom morale plunged, though the mood is said to have improved since the construction ended.

It will take time for the dust to settle on the print-Web integration. "It still feels like two media organizations," says Freddy Kunkle, a veteran reporter on the local staff. "It's almost as if there is a blogging culture, an online culture, an online media organization that has been inserted into the host of the old print organization, and it's kind of transferring its DNA, little by little, like a virus. A lot of folks who were on the print side are just not exactly sure where this is all going to go." Kunkle adds: "Even among some of the younger writers, there is unease about the new standards, or lack thereof, for writing Web stories, and the superficiality of what passes for an updated blog post, and the quest for eyeballs."

It's Brauchli's job to respond to that unease. But my reporting, which is based on more than fifty interviews with current and former *Post* employees, suggests that he has yet to articulate his vision clearly or win the full loyalty of his staff. Some sources used unflattering terms to describe him—"bureaucrat," "cipher," "organization man," "undertaker"; some people find him aloof and secretive, though his allies say in his defense that his Swiss origins explain his contained personality. Before an audience he is said to be a tongue-tied disaster; he is apparently better in one-on-one meetings. Brauchli admits he has work to do: "I'm probably not in the newsroom as much as I should be," he says. "My biggest weakness is that I don't get to spend enough time with reporters." Brauchli may have been a charismatic reporter, but he is not a charismatic editor. A distinguished reporter says: "He's a failed communicator. He's made very little effort to transmit his vision to the staff. He has no presence in the room in a larger sense. He doesn't seem interested in news or the Washington area. Most people don't understand why he's here."

HOW DOES THE *POST* LOOK TWO YEARS AFTER BRAUCHLI'S arrival? First, it must be acknowledged that his task is enormous: to put out a first-rate product with fewer resources in a punishing recession and a time of rapid technological change. A comprehensive report card on Brauchli's *Post* would require a separate article, but impressions can be formed. "The *Post* is still a good, serious, competitive newspaper," says Bill Keller. In an e-mail to me on July 21, Brauchli outlined some of his achievements:

We've kept up a strong cadence of investigative work—into subjects like the misallocation of AIDS money in the District, the hazards of the helicopter medevac business, the Redskins's ticket office; the lapses that led up to the Fort Hood shootings, and most recently the world we described in our *Top Secret America* series. We also have put in place terrific teams covering national security and politics, reporters who have pretty much defined the Afghanistan policy debate over the last year and brought our readers real understanding of the party schisms that are driving politics this year.

But a former *Post* foreign correspondent with a sharp eye says: "There are just large subjects that they just don't



**Merger** The new universal news desk is part of Brauchli's effort to rapidly move content to multiple platforms.

seem to deal with. They still have reporting power and talent that surfaces regularly in the A section and that makes itself indispensable. But it's around selected subjects or it's an ad-hoc surprise. The daily range of the paper's confidence is noticeably reduced. And on international coverage they're just not trying to cover the world every day anymore."

The departure of Anthony Shadid, who joined *The New York Times* in January, left a hole in the *Post's* foreign coverage. Shadid, forty-one, is the premier American foreign correspondent of his generation; his reporting for the *Post* from Iraq garnered two Pulitzer Prizes. "Anthony loved the *Post* more than anyone I know," says Karl Vick, who now works for *Time*. "For him to leave it was such a staggering blow" to the institution.

Colleagues say that Shadid was deeply dismayed by the way his mentors—Philip Bennett and David Hoffman—were pushed out by Brauchli. (Hoffman, it turns out, was awarded a Pulitzer Prize nine months after he left the *Post* for his book *The Dead Hand*; Bennett teaches at Duke.) Moreover, Shadid came to feel that his technique—which entails prodigious

reporting, lyrical writing, and deep skepticism of official sources—did not conform to Brauchli's Washington-based vision. "The *Post* is a great paper," Shadid said in July when I phoned him in Baghdad. "I think it will probably figure out what it has to do to survive. But the paper I joined in 2003 is not the paper I left in 2009. I say that as a foreign correspondent. It's a paper that was about Washington in the end." Shadid declined to discuss specifics. (The *Post* continues to lose gifted foreign correspondents: Steve Fainaru, a Pulitzer Prize winner, left in March, and Philip Pan, the Moscow bureau chief, recently announced his departure.)

Of the *Post's* foreign coverage, Karl Vick says: "You still see good enterprise reporting from the war zones. You don't see much of the rest of the world in there anymore." Bill Keller says, "Bless them for continuing to take foreign coverage seriously, but it hews more closely than before to stories that fit a Washington agenda, which sometimes has the odd effect of making the *Post's* world feel like an appendage of the State Department." The emphasis on Washington means there is less room for quirky and human-interest features

from abroad. “You’re seeing a lot more stories about policy,” says Keith Richburg. When the *Post* was edited by Downie and Steve Coll, the paper’s former managing editor, long, finely crafted stories were common. “Stories are coming in now at twenty-five or thirty inches,” says Richburg, “that used to routinely come in at forty or forty-five or fifty.”

When *Post* staffers are asked to describe the Brauchli era, they often use words like “chaos,” “reorganization,” or “time of transition.” Karl Vick offers a vivid example of chaotic political coverage. In January, Vick happened to be visiting

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## Brauchli declined to discuss lingering questions about his role in the ‘salon’ scandal, easily the most controversial aspect of his tenure at the *Post*.

the main newsroom in Washington, on break from his post in Los Angeles, when Scott Brown’s campaign began to surge in Massachusetts. An editor informed Vick they needed someone to cover the campaign; he agreed to do so. Vick recalls: “There was nobody on the ground. There was nobody who wanted to do it! This is supposed to be the nation’s premier political newsroom! And the L.A. reporter happens to have a weekend free. They sent him up! I was just amazed. To me, it spoke to no bench.”

I asked Thomas B. Edsall, who spent a quarter century covering politics for the *Post*, to assess the paper’s political coverage under Brauchli. “It’s not good to be dependent on Stanley Kaplan,” Edsall replied, referring to the testing and education firm that delivers substantial profits to The Washington Post Company. “If a newspaper is not making money, it loses self-confidence. Cowardice begins to set in. People are afraid of taking strong steps. As revenues began to decline, the aggressiveness of the *Post* also began to decline.”

In recent months, however, Edsall has noticed improvement: “They’re doing a pretty good job,” he says. “They’re getting stronger.” (He praises the reporting of Philip Rucker, Paul Kane, and Shailagh Murray.) John B. Judis, senior editor of *The New Republic*, agrees. In June 2009 Judis wrote a blog entry for TNR entitled “Who Killed The Washington Post?” He has since changed his mind. “I am amazed at how good it has become,” Judis wrote in a recent note to *Post* writers Ezra Klein and Alec MacGillis, referring to the *Post*’s domestic coverage. “I think Brauchli or whoever is pulling the strings there has figured out how to steer a path between the Web

scoops (Politico) and the kind of *New Republic*-type pieces that *Time* and *Newsweek* have been trying to run.”

Like almost every section of the *Post*, Style has seen the departure of some of its most gifted writers. There are still admirable pieces in Style, and you can still read Pulitzer Prize-winning critics Sarah Kaufman and Michael Dirda. But the section is a shadow of what it was in the 1970s, 1980s, and beyond. Thirty-nine-year Style veteran Henry Allen told Dave Kindred: “Style as a place where readers can find writing, evocation, wit, and even some literary art is gone.” On June 3, Manuel Roig-Franzia achieved a near-impossible feat: a sleep-inducing profile of Christopher Hitchens. On June 9, the lead feature in the section was a story about D.C. nightlife by DeNeen Brown. It was as thin as a crepe. When I asked Brauchli for his vision of Style, his answer was so vague as to be useless.

It’s in the context of the *Post*’s business coverage that one tends to hear the most enthusiasm for Brauchli. Referring to the economic crisis that began in 2008, Keith Richburg says, “He really was engaged in the financial story in a way that I don’t think any of our editors ever could have been. Some friends of mine on the financial staff were just amazed that the new editor was coming in and rolling up his sleeves and sitting there at the news desk helping write the leads to stories.” Paul Steiger notes that Brauchli always possessed an acute knowledge of finance, and adds: “The *Post*’s coverage of the economic crisis was terrific, way better than it would have been in the past, because Marcus knows that stuff.”

But the *Post* is printing much less business news than it did in the past. The paper killed its stand-alone business section in 2009 and, in the print edition, business news is scant. (There is richer fare on the *Post*’s Web site, thanks to a new collaboration with Bloomberg.) Some of the *Post*’s most impressive business talent has departed in recent years, and *Post* sources say that Brauchli was dismayed by the recent loss of thirty-two-year-old reporter Binyamin Appelbaum, who, like many *Post* reporters in recent years—including Peter Baker, Mark Leibovich, Peter S. Goodman, Michael Barbaro, and David Segal—decamped to *The New York Times*.

NO ASPECT OF THE BRAUCHLI ERA HAS BEEN AS CONTROVERSIAL as the “salon” scandal that erupted on July 2, 2009, after Politico reported that Katharine Weymouth had forged a scheme to bring together *Post* reporters, corporate lobbyists, and politicians for an exclusive series of salons at her own home; access would cost up to \$250,000. Politico obtained a flier that said: “Underwriting Opportunity: An Evening with the right people can alter the debate.” (Weymouth and Brauchli would, according to the flier, serve as “Hosts and Discussion Leaders.”) When the story broke, Weymouth immediately put the blame on *Post* marketing employee Charles Pelton—a specialist in conferences who had recently joined the company, and who had approved the flier.

In a phone interview, Brauchli declined to discuss the salon affair. Questions about his role linger. A few hours after the scandal broke, *Post* ombudsman Andrew Alexander wrote: “Brauchli said he never saw the flier and would not

have approved it." Alexander then quoted Brauchli directly: "I had no idea." On July 3, Brauchli told Howard Kurtz that he was "appalled" by the plan: "It suggests that access to *Washington Post* journalists was available for purchase." Under intense pressure from other news organizations, and from three *Post* staffers (Alexander, Kurtz, and Paul Farhi) tracking the story from within the newsroom, Brauchli tripped over his own shoelaces. Farhi wrote in the *Post* on July 5: "Brauchli has said he had planned to attend the dinners but was unaware that a flier was describing them as a 'collegial' and non-confrontational opportunity for a paying sponsor to gain exclusive access to *Post* journalists. If he had known, he said, he would have refused to participate...." On July 12, ombudsman Alexander published an autopsy of the affair—calling it an "ethical lapse of monumental proportions" and noting that two hundred *Post* managers, including the investigations editor, learned of the plan in an internal meeting on June 24.

The employee who approved the flier, Charles Pelton, hired a shrewd, energetic lawyer, George Frost, who attempted to reverse what he viewed as the systematic destruction of his client's reputation. Frost demanded that Brauchli clarify the record with regard to Pelton, an effort that bore fruit. The Web site that broke the salon story also put closure on it: in October, Politico obtained a letter from Brauchli to Pelton; it was dated September 25, 2009, and it was written on *Post* letterhead. Brauchli wrote:

Dear Charles.... I knew that the salon dinners were being promoted as 'off the record.' That fact was never hidden from me by you or anyone else. For instance, the dinners were described as 'off the record' in two slide presentations that I attended. You and I also discussed the off-the-record nature of the dinners... please feel free to share this letter with anyone who questions whether you kept me informed about the way the dinners were being promoted. Sincerely, Marcus Brauchli.

In the days after the scandal exploded, Brauchli had much explaining to do. "He sat there in that conference room," says Maralee Schwartz, "and took it, from reporter after reporter. That won him some personal loyalty." Others remain troubled. One *Post* reporter says: "This wouldn't have happened under Len."

A NOTABLE FEATURE OF DAVE KINDRED'S *MORNING MIRACLE* is his scathing treatment of Katharine Weymouth, whom he portrays as a journalistic featherweight. People who know Weymouth say that she never devoured the *Post* with Don Graham's intense interest, and unlike him, she never worked in the *Post* newsroom. Thus far the salon scandal is the ugliest blemish on her tenure, but there are other reasons for concern: in 2009 she took issue with a story planned for the *Post's* Sunday magazine about a young fashion-school graduate who endured the amputation of four limbs. The piece was killed by editors after Weymouth told its author, Matt Mendelsohn, that advertisers wanted "happier stories, not 'depressing' ones." (She also criticized Gene Weingarten's

powerful 2009 article about young children who perished after being left in parked cars. That piece, which appeared in the *Post's* magazine, won a Pulitzer.) Last year, Weymouth accepted a bonus of nearly \$500,000, a decision that drew a stinging letter from the Washington-Baltimore Newspaper Guild, which represents many employees at the *Post*. (Don Graham, the Guild noted, had declined to take a similar bonus.)

Before my June interview with Brauchli, I had breakfast with Walter Pincus, who, owing to knee trouble, hobbled into the restaurant with a cane. Pincus, seventy-seven, is a direct link to the Bradlee era, and a man acquainted with the *Post's* dark corners. He admires Brauchli: "Marcus impressed Katharine as somebody who is more than a newsroom editor. And he is. He's interested in the whole business." Pincus is a strong proponent of a cutting-edge Web site for the *Post*, and he occasionally e-mails Raju Narisetti with suggestions about new digital products the *Post* should roll out. But he also cautions *Post* management not to neglect the print edition, which still provides most of the revenue for the *Post*.

One doesn't envy the burden that rests on the shoulders of Weymouth and Brauchli. They have a newspaper that is rapidly losing circulation and a Web site whose profits cannot yet sustain a well-staffed newsroom. Brauchli is obviously energized by the challenges presented by the Web. When he talked to me about *Washingtonpost.com*, there was a sparkle in his eye. He seemed more detached and somber about the print edition.

Let Brauchli and Weymouth roll out a universe of interactive widgets, online chats, blogs, and news alerts, if that is what it will take for the institution to survive in the Wild West of cyberspace. Let's hope that, along the way, they find a way to improve the overall readability of *Washingtonpost.com*, which is harder to navigate than other major newspaper Web sites. And let's also hope they clarify the relationship between fact, opinion, and free speech for writers; the David Weigel affair, in which a *Post* reporter-blogger was forced out for his pointed comments on a list-serve, revealed that the *Post* has no coherent guidelines on that score.

Brauchli knows how to read a spreadsheet and how to serve the needs of some online readers. But the *Post* also needs a leader who is articulate, imaginative, and inspirational, and some of his troops are restless. A reporter with a sterling reputation wonders: "How much longer is Don going to stand for this? When will he say: 'this is not working—we need a different person?'" For now, the *Post's* talented staff must insist that Brauchli and Weymouth do not neglect the core journalistic mission of the *Post*, a mission that, in the Watergate era, inspired bumper stickers that declared: THANK GOD FOR THE WASHINGTON POST. Unless Brauchli and Weymouth want to be remembered as cost-cutters and bureaucrats, they had better find a way to recapture some of the flair and magic of the old *Post* as they build a new one. **CJR**

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SCOTT SHERMAN is a contributing editor to the *Columbia Journalism Review* and a contributing writer to *The Nation*. Ethan Scholl provided research for this article.

# See It Now!

*Video journalism is dying. Long live video journalism.*

BY JILL DREW

As the video begins, no announcer welcomes you, no headline scrolls across the computer screen. There is no need for either. You know where you are from the logic of the images. The camera lingers on the anticipatory expressions on people's faces at Barack Obama's inauguration; it holds steady as endless streams of people slowly fill the National Mall. Natural sound builds the excitement. Parallels between Obama's 2009 swearing-in and Martin

Luther King Jr.'s 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial are subtly drawn—in the words, for example, of a man who stands to hear Obama's oath at the spot where King once stood.

It is a lyrical narrative, produced by a team of mainly self-taught video journalists who, at the time, worked for Washingtonpost.com. In a media-saturated world, the story is unique, an eight-minute journey that lives up to its promising title, *In the Moment*. Like all the best journalism, it brings you right there.

Online video news can do that so well, and so much better now with advances in technology: palm-size cameras, nimble editing tools, digital formats, broadband connections. We can create candid, cinematic gems that hold the promise of luring those who grew up with the Web—young people—into serious journalism.

Of course, the Web is exploding with video of all kinds.

YouTube recently announced that twenty-four hours worth of video is being posted to its site every minute. Only a small portion of that could be called news, and the overwhelming majority of even that sliver of video is not quality, documentary-style essays, but bits of breaking news.

Because the Web is so fragmented—and because search tools for visual files are so primitive—intimate news narratives are nearly impossible to find unless you know the URL or something close to it. "The challenge is to try to get them in an environment that puts them in the best light," says Bill Burke, global director of online video products at The Associated Press, which has won several awards for its video storytelling. "We haven't found it."

For this and several other reasons, the promise of a new frontier of great video journalism, so palpable as recently as 2007, is receding. My personal experience is rooted in twenty-five years of print journalism, but I recognize this retreat as the absolute wrong direction. Serious journalists should not give up on video. It's far too soon for that.

STRONG VIDEO JOURNALISM IS CAUGHT in a vicious circle. Because it gets lost in the flood of other video, too few users find the high-quality, well-produced stories. So despite the higher rates publishers have been able to charge advertisers to place short video ads before news videos, total revenue for them remains disappointingly small. That, in turn, makes it tough for newsroom

managers to justify investing in great video storytelling in the first place.

Meanwhile, search engines reward with higher rankings those content providers that update often and provide a robust stream of offerings. Time-pressed news staff members have difficulty keeping up with both production and quality demands: one or the other starts to slip. This leads to such practices as TV news broadcasters filling their sites with clips and outtakes, and shying away from unique visual stories tailored for the Web. Print news sites gin up regular video "shows" that draw loyal viewers and boost their numbers, but also drain resources from higher-level storytelling. The poor Web viewer swims in a sea of marginal content, convinced that online news video is a time-sink of spoofs, self-indulgent polemics, and shaky footage of car crashes.

The AP is one of what seems to be a shrinking handful of media companies continuing to invest in quality video.

Many organizations have shrunk their staffs or shifted their ambitions. For example, several documentary-style video journalists who produced *The Washington Post's* inauguration piece left the paper after their positions were eliminated. The *Post's* video unit now consists of five full-time video journalists tasked primarily with quick-turnaround assignments. "Why does video have to pay the bills?" says Pierre Kattar, an Emmy Award-winning former *Post* video journalist whose position was eliminated in late 2009. "Do people look at print stories and ask, 'How much money did that make?'" Kattar says wistfully. "We were building something."

I'm wistful, too. I yearn to see more of what I've come to love—intimate video journalism, stories of real situations in which the characters may be aware the camera is there, but the moment is so intense that the camera is irrelevant. Technology enables this close-up storytelling at a very low cost, broadband Internet allows it to be distributed widely, and screen devices of all sizes and shapes make it a beautiful thing to watch. I have not succeeded in getting my sixteen-year-old son to read newspapers, but I hold out hope that he will engage with serious news video if the stories are compelling enough to entice him away from Collegehumor.com.

It's especially important to capture the attention of young people. Today's eight- to eighteen-year-olds spend an average of seven hours and thirty-eight minutes each day consuming media and actually view ten hours and forty-five minutes of it daily, because of multitasking, according to a January 2010 report from the Kaiser Family Foundation. Only thirty-eight minutes of that time is spent consuming print, down from forty-three minutes in 2004.

Bringing a viewer to the heart of the action, without a stand-up journalist explaining what ought to be clearly understandable through the images themselves, appeals to the raw, unfiltered ethos of the Internet. I believe that if nurtured and promoted, visual narratives could take their place alongside the social-media tools of blogs and tweets as a breakthrough form of journalism for the digital age.

Bringing a viewer to the heart of the action, without a stand-up journalist explaining what ought to be clearly understandable through the images themselves, appeals to the raw, unfiltered ethos of the Internet. I believe that if nurtured and promoted, visual narratives could take their place alongside the social-media tools of blogs and tweets as a breakthrough form of journalism for the digital age.

WHEN WE THINK OF ONLINE VIDEO NEWS, WE OFTEN THINK of harrowing incidents caught on a flip camera or cell phone that become viral sensations. Such videos represent a revolution in newsgathering, and add to our sense of the world. If a bomb goes off in an Afghan market, we want to see what happened. When Neda Agha-Soltan was shot in Tehran during the 2009 Iranian election protests, the citizen video of her death riveted millions. The anonymous individuals who recorded and uploaded it were awarded the 2009 George Polk Award for videography.

It's almost automatic today: see something newswor-

thy, film it. For journalism, that's both bad and good. The bad: hours of weak video posted online of mildly interesting events, numbing the viewer. The good: some videos are powerful by themselves, while others can be raw material for experienced journalists to build a more complete story.

Angela Grant, a freelance video journalist in Austin, recalls an incident there in February in which a man flew a plane into a building. "There were videos taken from cell phones, flip cams, and point-and-shoots, because bystanders were the only people there," she says. Together, it provided a valuable "picture of events that otherwise wouldn't be available."

But breaking news is where that value often ends, says Grant, who worked as a multimedia and video journalist at the *San Antonio Express-News* until December 2008. "No amateur is going to sit through a city council meeting, then go read hundreds of documents on tests of environmental quality, and then head out two weeks later to interview executives at a company that may be producing a toxic substance. It's really complicated to find a character-based narrative in all that." Those video stories take time and skill to build—ingredients in short supply at over-taxed news organizations.

Breaking news video—regardless of quality—is building audiences for a select few sites. According to the Web research firm comScore, news is keeping pace with the explosive growth in all online video viewing. In

May there were 566 million views of what comScore classifies as news video, which includes weather sites. That's about double the 278 million views recorded for May 2009. CNN.com and MSNBC.com are the two biggest news sites in terms of video traffic, says a comScore spokesman. The two sites, plus Yahoo News, make up 70 percent of comScore's video news category. (ComScore's data is really just a rough approximation of news viewing online, given the difficulty in classifying what's news. For example, everything on YouTube is considered entertainment by comScore and is not included in its figures, although YouTube does stream a lot of news uploaded by media organizations as well as individual users.)

The problem with traffic as the main measure of news video, though, is that great video stories that don't attract big audiences are perceived to be failures. David Leeson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer who began shooting video in 2000 for *The Dallas Morning News*, says publishers initially backed video "because they had visions of YouTube fame. But with 80,000 to 90,000 videos published every day, going viral is like winning the lottery. Good luck with that." Leeson, who took a buyout in 2008, acknowledges that a thirty-second clip of an eighteen-wheeler that crashed and burned gets a lot of hits. But he argues that managers need to take their eyes off the number of streams and instead look at the larger, changing market for news. "Over time, people

### Worth Watching

For links to these high-quality news videos, go to [www.cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/drew\\_links.php](http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/drew_links.php)



### "Killer Blue: Baptized by Fire, U.S. Soldiers in Iraq" by The Associated Press

AP still and video photographers lived with a Fort Hood squadron for four months, through combat and the adjustment to civilian life.

will recognize quality,” Leeson says. “People will know to go to your site for credible news and information. That’s how papers built circulation. You didn’t know if everyone read an inside story on page four of Metro, but we still covered it.”

Photographers and video journalists like Leeson are increasingly attracted to work for advocacy groups and corporations that see the value of powerful visual storytelling. With that exodus, serious journalism suffers. In journalism, “ultimately, video was viewed as window dressing, a fundamental misunderstanding of its potential,” says Tom Kennedy, a former managing editor for multimedia at Washingtonpost.com, who stepped down in early 2009 to teach and consult.

Kennedy, who will begin teaching at Syracuse University this fall, recently authored a white paper on video journalism for Bill Gentile, an independent documentary filmmaker and journalist-in-residence at American University. Gentile has launched the “Backpack Journalism” project at the school, a program to teach people to act as one-man journalism bands on video stories: report, interview, shoot, edit, narrate, and upload their files for publication.

Kennedy and Gentile make a powerful argument for this as the storytelling of the future, but the white paper adds, “Backpack journalism may afford interesting future career opportunities, albeit perhaps most strongly in fields other than journalism.” Ugh.

ON JULY 18, I DID A GOOGLE SEARCH FOR VIDEO OF “OIL spill” and “BP.” I specified “high quality” in my query, but didn’t limit the length or narrow the date range. No videos from major news organizations appeared in the top ten returns. What did appear seemed random. Search is a real problem when it comes to quality news video.

My search’s top-ranked video was from a site called Hollywoodbackstage.com: a silent, fifty-nine second montage of aerial images from an oil-slicked Gulf. Numbers two and four were entertaining, but not news: two was a *Saturday Night Live* skit via Hulu.com and four was a funny spoof of BP executives dealing with a coffee spill during a meeting, performed by UCBcomedy.com. Number three was an informative snippet from Al Jazeera’s English-language broadcast, with a host explaining an animated graphic of the engineering needed to cap the blown well. The other top ten picks included a couple of souped-up home videos, a couple of apocalyptic screeds, and an excerpt from ABC’s *The View*, with the hosts discussing BP’s apology.

Hoping for the best, I continued to search. Return number eleven was actually a pretty good video story, an excerpt from a show on the satellite and cable broadcaster G4, which targets eighteen- to thirty-four-year-olds with a steady diet of video game-oriented shows. Host Kevin Pereira takes you

on his tour of the Gulf, and his co-host attempts to interest viewers with this unusual lead-in: “All right, so you remember that time you spilled a Pepsi on your PS3 and you thought it was the worst spill ever? It wasn’t.” As the segment ends, the viewer knows she’s not on CNN when the camera returns to the show set and pop-up boxes helpfully inform viewers where to buy the blue jeans Pereira is wearing and what hair products he used. Hmmmm.

Searching Google News and specifying video did pull up stories from mainstream media organizations, but most were print stories that referred to BP’s well cam. Nowhere in that search, or in a YouTube search for “news BP Oil Spill,” did a video story I knew about turn up: AP’s unique Web video of journalist Rich Matthews’s June 7 scuba dive into the oily Gulf.

Although it’s not a candid essay, it is pretty gutsy journalism. Matthews zipped himself into a wet suit, clutched his camera, and dropped down over the side of a boat to give viewers a first-hand look at the foul miasma beneath the waterline. The swirling, reddish ooze had the consistency of cake batter, Matthews reported, and though it quickly gunked up his goggles and smeared his camera lens, he was able to record oil in every direction, in plumes and blobs, along with what one diver called “snot balls” of oil dispersants. “It was a different take

on a story that was getting tedious” to cover in constant drips of breaking news, says Kevin Roach, AP’s vice president and director of U.S. broadcast news. “The story opened up a lot of eyes.”

But the AP story wasn’t anywhere near the top of my search query returns a month after it was originally posted—though the video was widely noticed when it was first shot. It had logged more than 160,000 views on YouTube, and Matthews had been interviewed on the *Today Show*, CNN, Fox News, the BBC, and numerous radio stations.

Executives at both YouTube and its parent company, Google, recognize that finding and categorizing news video is still an elusive goal. “Video is a rich media type and there are added complexities to making it easily discoverable and useful,” a Google spokesman says. “While we constantly work to improve our understanding of video and other information, in the meantime we encourage video publishers to submit video sitemaps so their videos are more easily discoverable in all Google’s services.” In other words, returning relevant material for video search queries is really hard.

Search today still generally begins with text, with people like me typing “BP” and “oil spill” and “video” into a query box. Google takes that query and attempts to match my key words with documents and images online that Web folks have tagged with matching key words. Although the Google spokesman says the search should be able to sense that I’m looking for news video, there’s no easy way to tell it to do

### Worth Watching



**“Intended Consequences: Rape as a Weapon in Rwanda” by MediaStorm**  
Jonathan Torgovnik’s complex piece asks, How do these women care for children born as a result of brutal mass rapes?

that. Google is working on at least two projects that might eventually help improve its video searches. The first is a speech-recognition process being employed at YouTube that can automatically caption audio files, creating a text transcript that could then be searched. The second is Google Goggles, an experimental application for smart phones that offer hope of enhanced visual search. I take a photo of, say, the Eiffel Tower and upload it to Google, essentially asking it to tell me about this image. Google Goggles recognizes the image and sends me information about it.

YouTube, meanwhile, hired interns this past summer to curate the best breaking-news videos from around the world, creating a feed of top stories uploaded by citizen journalists and learning more about how people find and share what they believe are important videos. "It's an experiment to understand this ecosystem better and to make it more useful to media," says Steve Grove, YouTube's head of news and politics. Grove also wants to gather information to help determine what search algorithms might work best to discover news video.

A few sites aren't waiting for search to improve, but are using their own people to find and promote what they believe to be worthy videos. For example SlateV, a video magazine for those who favor Slate's sensibilities, both produces its own videos—an average of five a week—and curates newsworthy videos produced by others, highlighting the best under the headline, "Did You See This?"

SlateV's videos aren't full-blown visual essays. Often they are clever takeoffs on the news. And in the curated part of its site, SlateV highlights buzz-worthy videos from all over, most of which aren't journalism. In the curated news and politics section, users can find parodies and political ads alongside opinion and advocacy videos. SlateV's editor, Andy Bowers, a long-time correspondent for NPR before joining Slate in 2003, said he expects more news-related videos to be produced by organizations other than the media. The question he asks himself is less "What organizations are producing this?" he says, and more "Is this responsible or is this propaganda?" He adds: "I think more and more you'll see these organizations produce what we call journalism."

Colin Mulvany, a photographer and video journalists for the *Spokesman-Review* in Spokane, Washington, is carrying the flag for superior video storytelling. Mulvany said he trained fourteen people in his newsroom to shoot video but nine of them were subsequently laid off. Now he and a handful of others attempt to produce well-crafted video features as well as news, in collaboration with print reporters. And because there is rarely anyone in newsroom management with enough expertise to critique the work of video journalists, Mulvany started a site called Findingtheframe.com to fill the void. It's a kind of self-help organization that seeks

to improve the quality of online video features. Findingtheframe.com invites news-video journalists to submit their stories for critiques by a panel of experts.

"This is going to be the future of the Internet. Video is the language online," Mulvany says. "But video journalism is still a goat trail."

BRIAN STORM FORMED HIS OWN MULTIMEDIA PRODUCTION company, MediaStorm, in 2005 to prove that a business could be built around online cinematic narratives. He's succeeding.

Storm says he takes a "disciplined" approach to his work and pursues topics that he personally cares about, with what he calls "ass-kicking storytelling." Ultimately, he says, the video that will succeed online is either "cats spinning on a fan or the greatest story done on Darfur. No one's gonna tweet what's in the middle."

In the past five years, his company has produced twenty-seven online documentaries and dozens of other projects for a variety of clients. He won't reveal traffic, but points to a twenty-one-minute video story—following an illegal immigrant from Cameroon—that he said had a 65 percent completion rate, meaning the viewer stayed with the story for

its entire length. Average time on his site was eleven and a half minutes earlier this year, before a redesign that he believes will increase the figure. At press time, MediaStorm has some 5,900 Twitter followers and 8,000 Facebook fans, 54 percent of whom are between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four. "Our entire careers as journalists they told us that eighteen- to thirty-four-year-olds don't care," he says.

MediaStorm's business is divided into four parts. The first is his team's own, independent journalism projects. The second is co-productions with other journalism organizations, including the *Los Angeles Times* and MSNBC. MediaStorm and the partner sites co-produce the story, each posts it on its own site, and then they share the advertising revenue. The third is straight client work, which is the real money-maker. For repeat clients like the Asia Society, the Council on Foreign Relations, and Starbucks, its one corporate client, MediaStorm produces multimedia projects with the same high-quality storytelling as its journalism. "We love to work with NGOs. We love having a mission and resources," Storm says. "They pay five times what *The New York Times* would pay for the same content."

The fourth leg of his business is training others to shoot and edit high-impact multimedia and run a business his way. The workshop films also get showcased on his site. One notable piece is *Take Care*, an eight-minute story of a twenty-two-year-old woman in Staten Island and her complex family life.

### Worth Watching



**"In Beichuan, China, the Agony of Surviving" by Travis Fox then of *The Washington Post***  
Beichuan was destroyed in the earthquake of 2008, but friends and relatives of the dead kept coming back.

Storm won't disclose revenue, but profits pay for him and his staff—and their journalism projects. He took a year to produce *Intended Consequences*, a multimedia story on rapes during the Rwandan genocide. It was the first Web story to win an Alfred I. DuPont-Columbia University award, earlier this year. The story also raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the victims of Rwandan rapes. "I remember sitting in an office in 1995 and talking about Rwanda while my fifty-year-old bosses said no one would care about that story," Storm says. "Audiences are apathetic to those issues and won't watch it," they said. Well, our audience is fired up. They are telling stories every day. They have tools to promote them, on Twitter, Facebook, and blogs. The people who are apathetic are in newsrooms, where they've gone through so many layoffs. The audience is hungry for great stories.

"I'm tired of people saying we're the future. We're the present," Storm says. "I have real bills to pay and I make the money to do it."

THERE ARE OTHER PLACES ON THE Web that experiment with documentary-style storytelling. Honkytonk.fr is one that Duy Linh Tu, a multimedia expert and coordinator of the digital media program at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, likes to keep an eye on. The French multimedia production house posts video stories that include many clickable boxes, giving the viewer options for which parts of the story to pursue. Its presentation is not unlike those children's books that tell you to skip to page 53 if Sharon opens the door, or to flip to page 11 if she keeps it closed. The topics vary, from Euro rock-and-roll to oil industry practices in the Amazon. "It's really innovative, but also really tedious," Duy says. "It forces me to click around, so I don't get a narrative. When I watch video, I expect you to tell me a story."

Travis Fox, the Emmy Award-winning video producer and pioneer of online multimedia journalism, agrees. "Telling stories online is not as different as people think," he says. "There's a debate at the beginning of every Web production about how interactive to make it. I believe you just need to tell a good story and keep it simple."

I had the privilege of watching Fox do just that when we traveled together as *Washington Post* correspondents in China's Sichuan province, after the massive earthquake in 2008 that killed nearly 90,000 people. I wrote my own piece from the top of a rubble pile a couple of days before Travis arrived, but it is his video story from the devastated town of Beichuan that still haunts me. Fox's position was eliminated at the *Post* and he's on his own now, doing work for PBS's *Frontline* and *Frontline.org*.

*Frontline* is innovating on the Web, Fox says, but following more of a "DVD model," by showcasing its main feature—

often a full-length documentary—and then adding extras. "They're not changing the centerpiece journalism, but adding more stuff," he says. Raney Aronson-Rath, *Frontline's* senior producer, argues that "Cracking the digital narrative is our future." With a \$1 million grant from the Verizon Foundation, *Frontline* was able to build a first-rate site as a companion to its ninety-minute documentary, *Digital Nation*, which aired on PBS earlier this year. The *Digital Nation* site went live in March 2009, a year before the documentary was to be broadcast, and filmmaker Rachel Dretzin plunged herself into a world of unusually transparent reporting—posting rough cuts and raw footage for feedback.

"I had to take a deep breath and say I was going to trust the process," Dretzin said. She posted fifty-one rough cuts, eighty-two interview excerpts and at least nine other Web-special pieces as she built the documentary.

After *Digital Nation* aired, Dretzin and her team held an online roundtable discussion to debate which was more satisfying—the Web site experience or the ninety-minute broadcast. Some, like Mark Bauerlein, author of *The Dumbest Generation* and an English professor at Emory University, wrote that the documentary "plays fair with both sides and gives ample airing of different views." For others, the Web was the winner. Henry Jenkins, a communications professor at the

University of Southern California, wrote that while he found the documentary to be "mind-numbing and relentless," he found the Web site "to be an extraordinary resource," largely because it is "multi-vocal, allowing many points of view."

Dretzin and *Frontline* executive producer David Fanning agreed that the experiment with *Digital Nation's* Web site was a step toward better understanding of how to do documentary-style journalism on the Web. While recognizing the more free-ranging nature of Web viewing, Fanning still values the conscious story-building talents of directors. "Random video is disposable," he says. "Our interest is in creating a video that connects and stays connected to its context."

MY EDITOR CALLS THE STORY YOU ARE READING A *CRÉ DE COEUR*. Perhaps he's right.

My heart is with news organizations like the *Detroit Free Press*, whose multimedia efforts remain strong. The paper has won four Emmys in the past three years, including one in 2010 for its unusually intimate multimedia series on Christ Child House, a foster care center for legal orphans on Detroit's west side.

And with the *Las Vegas Sun*, which combined flip-cam recordings made by Las Vegas resident Tony McDew—as he bottomed out in his gambling addiction—with its own video interviews with him, for a story that runs eighteen minutes.

## Worth Watching



### "Where Children Find Hope: Christ House, Home for Michigan's Legal Orphans" by the *Detroit Free Press*

The young boys at Christ Child House on Detroit's west side laugh, cry, worry, and wait for a family to give them a home.

McDew records himself after a big win, fanning out hundred dollar bills in front of the screen. He records himself climbing into his van after losing, spritzing his face with water because the vehicle has no air conditioning. He records himself as he pawns his possessions before heading back to the casino to try to claw out of a very deep hole. You go along with him as he does all the wrong things and loses some \$35,000.

And with Time Inc.'s Craig Duff, who holds fast to standards as he tries to produce eight video stories a week, telling his small staff, "We can't let it go because it's quote-unquote just for the Web."

And with reporters like Ian Shapira, who blogged on Washingtonpost.com's Story Lab site about working in print but studying video journalism on the site, to try to master a form he believes in.

And with Ann Derry, editorial director of video and television for *The New York Times*, who has an eighteen-person staff and a goal of "making video become a storytelling and journalistic language for the *Times*, the way print and photographs are." She's experimenting with formats like TimesCast, the daily report from the *Times* newsroom. Though I'm not a fan of TimesCast—because it's mainly newsroom interviews and they're pretty boring—I'm happy Derry's team is trying to build awareness among viewers about *Times* video, which can be really good. One of my recent favorites is *An American at the Bolshoi*, which follows a fifteen-year-old who leaves her family in Texas to learn dance at the highest level.

News-related video today is a raucous field. It's a place where you find the number-one story on YouTube's top news category to be a parody of Old Spice commercials. But you also find that The Associated Press's YouTube channel has streamed more than 458 million videos since September 2006, providing quality, hard-core news to a wide audience.

Because video reporting is a game everyone can play, consequently blurring all the lines that had previously set off professional, independent inquiry, it's more important than ever that serious journalism organizations engage in video as more than just an offshoot of their core missions.

For candid video to move to the forefront of online news and address a rising generation of news consumers, several things have to change: online video journalists need to develop their own storytelling styles, breaking with the anchor-centered conventions of broadcast. Newsrooms need to better integrate and bolster their multimedia and video staffs, and create career paths for visual journalists that extend right to the top. Great video needs to be promoted just as big text stories are.

Video stories need to be judged like all other stories—by how good they are, not how many clicks they get. And at the

same time, media companies need to push search engines to focus on creating better tools to highlight well-produced, unique video stories.

ALTHOUGH THERE'S LIKELY TO BE NO IMMEDIATE PAYOFF, the current obstacles—like poor search returns—that block quality stories from finding quality audiences will be surmounted.

I have seen such things happen before, through the prism of my own family. My husband's father, Robert L. Drew, was a correspondent for *Life* magazine when he took a 1955 Nieman fellowship and developed a concept for candid filmmaking that became the basis of cinema vérité in the U.S. It's his concept of "picture logic," versus "word logic," that I feel is the key to great video.

He produced breakthrough documentaries like *Primary*—the first candid documentary, which followed John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey on the stump in Wisconsin in 1960—and *Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment*, filmed inside the White House and in the Alabama governor's mansion as the Kennedy administration forced the segregation of the University of Alabama against the will of Governor, George Wallace.

He revolutionized visual journalism with his belief that a camera shouldn't stand on a tripod, but should move freely with the characters. Working with Albert Maysles, D. A. Pennebaker, and Richard Leacock, he took the tools available and re-engineered them to work in new ways, including replacing a camera's noisy metal gears with quieter ones, fashioned from plastic, to enable a new kind of intimate storytelling. Today's lightweight and easy-to-use technology makes it easy for journalists to continue exploring candid filmmaking.

My other inspiration here is my husband, Derek Drew, who started a little venture back in the early 1990s to provide meta-reviews of consumer products. His Consumersearch.com remained obscure—until Google's algorithms revolutionized search. Then his high-quality content soon stood atop Google's search results for queries like "best washing machine" or "digital camera reviews" and traffic started pouring in. He sold the outfit to The New York Times Company's About.com subsidiary in 2007 for \$33 million.

The content on Consumersearch.com in 1999 was essentially the same as the content in 2007. But superior search transformed it into a high-growth, moneymaking business.

The same can happen with online narrative video. It's so close. I can feel it. **CJR**

### Worth Watching



#### **"Bottoming Out: Living With a Gambling Addiction" by Scott Den Herder of the Las Vegas Sun**

The thrill of easy money is what drew Tony McDew to the casino again and again, until he knew he had to stop.

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JILL DREW, a former business editor and foreign correspondent for The Washington Post, is a CJR Encore Fellow. She wrote about the future of nonprofit investigative news outlets in the May/June issue.

# What Is Russia Today?

*A Kremlin propaganda outlet has an identity crisis*

BY JULIA IOFFE

On Election Day 2008, two African-American men in black fatigues and berets stood outside a polling station in a predominantly black neighborhood of Philadelphia. They were members of the New Black Panther Party, which the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Anti-Defamation League have labeled a hate group. One of the men wielded a police-style nightstick, and there were complaints about voter intimidation. Police eventually escorted the armed

man away without incident, but the outgoing Bush administration filed a civil suit against the party alleging violations of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In May 2009, against the advice of prosecutors who had worked on the case, President Obama's Justice Department dropped the suit, a move that caused barely a ripple in the press at the time. The case came back to life in July, though, when a former Justice Department lawyer testified before the Commission on Civil Rights that the case was dropped because the Justice Department did not want to protect the civil rights of white people.

Fox News began to air allegations of an anti-white bias at the Obama Justice Department. But almost no one else reported on the case—it was old, tenuous, and even a prominent conservative commenter called it “small potatoes.” One outlet that did pick up the story, however, was Russia Today, a fairly new and still mostly obscure English-language cable news channel funded by the Russian government.

Russia Today was conceived as a soft-power tool to improve Russia's image abroad, to counter the anti-Russian bias the Kremlin saw in the Western media. Since its founding in 2005, however, the broadcast outlet has become better known as an extension of former President Vladimir Putin's confrontational foreign policy. Too often the channel was provocative just for the sake of being provocative. It featured fringe-dwelling “experts,” like the Russian historian who predicted the imminent dissolution of the United States; broadcast bombastic speeches by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez; aired ads conflating Barack Obama with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; and ran out-of-nowhere reports on the homeless in America. Often, it seemed that Russia Today was just a way to stick it to the U.S. from behind the façade of legitimate newsgathering.

So it was fairly unremarkable when Russia Today, in a July 8 segment called “Fox News stirring up racial fears in America,” interviewed the chairman of the New Black Panther Party, Dr. Malik Zulu Shabazz, who lambasted Republicans for playing on people's fears in an effort to dominate the fall midterm elections.

But then Russia Today did something out of character. When Fox's Glenn Beck attacked the segment, asking why Russian state-run TV was suddenly “in lock-step” with the Obama administration, Russia Today fired back in a way that was puzzling to anyone familiar with the channel. On July 9, Alyona Minkovksi, who hosts a daily program called *The Alyona Show*, laid into Beck—“the doughboy nut job from Fox News”—with patriotic American fervor: “I get to ask all the questions that the American people want answered about their own country because I care about this country and I don't work for a corporate-owned media organization,” she said, her voice rising.

Fox... you hate Americans. Glenn Beck, you *hate* Americans. Because you lie to them, you scare them, you try to warp their minds. You tell them that we're becoming some socialist country... You're not on the side of America. And the fact that my channel is more honest with the American people is something you should be ashamed of.

Huh? Forget the Obama administration, since when does Russia Today defend the policies of *any* American president? Or the informational needs of the American public, for that matter? Like many of RT's journalists, Minkovksi is a Russian immigrant, born in Moscow, raised and educated in the West,



**Questions for the boss** Margarita Simonyan, seen here with President Medvedev in 2008, was selected to run Russia Today, the Kremlin's answer to Russia's global image problem.

and hired by the network for her fluency in both English and Russian—she is someone who could be both Russia's ambassador to the West as well as its Sherpa into the Western mind. But her tirade against Fox offers a glimpse into the mind of a changing Russia Today.

ON APRIL 25, 2005, RUSSIAN PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN went on national television and told his nation that the

destruction of the Soviet Union was “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century.” He meant that the union’s dissolution had ushered in years of sinusoidal financial crises, but also that he mourned the passing glory of a great empire he had once served as a lieutenant colonel in the KGB. In the speech, Putin also expressed his hope that Russia would become a “free and democratic country,” but at its own pace. “Russia will decide for itself the pace, terms, and conditions of moving towards democracy,” he said, laying the foundation for a political creed that would become known as “sovereign democracy.” It is a phrase that became shorthand for what the West called Russia’s “resurgence,” and what Russia called its independence of an externally imposed Western morality.

Putin could do this because in 2005 things were going well. Oil prices were rising—they had more than doubled since he became president in 2000—and the Russian people were increasingly behind him and his brand of paternalistic nationalism. But with the return of Russia’s pride, so wounded during the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin’s reputation suffered as Western and domestic critics attacked Putin for the steady degradation of democracy on his watch. Gubernatorial elections were eliminated, potential rivals—oligarchs like media king Vladimir Gusinsky and oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky—were either driven from the country or unceremoniously locked up. Unsympathetic journalists were turning up dead.

Just over a month after the speech, the Kremlin announced the solution to its image problem. It would not change its defiant rhetoric of exceptionalism. Instead, it would launch a new international television channel

that explained its actions—and its terms—to the rest of the world. It would be in English and would broadcast twenty-four hours a day.

Though the project had roots in the cold war-era “Radio Moscow,” which beamed news from the Soviet Union around the world, it is better explained by Putin’s obsession with television. As a child of the post-World War II generation, Putin, like his Western counterparts, was raised on it. As president, he took tapes of the day’s news broadcasts home to

watch and analyze how he was covered. To Putin, television was the only way to get his message across while retaining full control of that message. One of his first moves as president was to force out the oligarchs running the independent television stations and bring their channels under state ownership—and censorship. Soon, the heads of television stations were meeting every Friday with Vladislav Surkov, Putin's chief political strategist, to set the agenda for the coming week. The instincts of self-censorship took care of the rest.

But even with internal critics effectively marginalized, the external enemies remained. Moreover, they were the same ones who sat in their air-conditioned Washington think tanks and applauded the series of revolutions that replaced Russia-friendly rulers in the former Soviet territories with pro-Western leaders who wanted to do things like join NATO, which Russia considers its biggest military threat to this day.

ON JUNE 7, 2005, MARGARITA SIMONYAN HELD A PRESS conference in which she announced the creation of Russia Today. “It will be a perspective on the world from Russia,” she told reporters. “Many foreigners are surprised to see that Russia is different from what they see in media reports. We will try to present a more balanced picture.”

The new channel would be nonprofit and run out of the headquarters of RIA Novosti, the state news agency. Despite having a large degree of autonomy, it would ultimately answer directly to its funder, the Kremlin. Simonyan, who was hired to run the news outlet, had just turned twenty-five. “Of course, I was nervous,” she wrote in response to questions from C.J.R. “It’s a tremendous responsibility.”

Simonyan’s story is in many ways typical of a young person in Moscow today. An ethnic Armenian born in Krasnodar, the southern Russian region abutting the breakaway Georgian region of Abkhazia, Simonyan comes from a blue-collar family. Her father was a refrigerator repairman, her mother stayed at home. “My parents have nothing to do with television,” Simonyan says. “Yet, even before I went to school, I knew I wanted to be a journalist. I didn’t even understand fully what the word meant.”

Like many of her generation, Simonyan started her career at a young age. After doing stories for the local newspaper, she was hired at eighteen to work at a local television station while studying journalism full-time at nearby Kuban University. This arrangement, repeated by students across the country who have any amount of ambition, is especially common in fields that did not exist in the Soviet era, like advertising, finance, and media, in which there is still a huge personnel vacuum. Moreover, these are fields for which Russian universities, still not fully up to speed, cannot adequately prepare them. Many of these ambitious “provincials” eventually come to Moscow, where as hungry outsiders they quickly outpace their less-driven Muscovite peers.

By 2004, then, twenty-four-year-old Simonyan was already in Moscow and working as a correspondent in the Kremlin press pool for Rossiya, the number two state television network with an audience of 50 million. To be picked for the Kremlin press pool is an honor but also a sign of trustwor-

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**From the start, RT featured the extreme views that would define it in the West, such as the authors who predicted a civil war in the U.S.**

thiness. The pool is a place for the most loyal of the loyalists. To be assigned to cover the Russian president, especially for television, a reporter has to be absolutely reliable in his docility, and in his ability to ask softball questions. A year later, RIA Novosti tapped Simonyan to head Russia Today.

After three months of around-the-clock rehearsal, Russia Today went live on December 10, 2005. The format, which has changed little in five years, began with a half-hour news block at the top of the hour, followed by features—culture, sports, business—in the bottom half. Three satellites beamed stories to Europe and the United States. Mostly, it was news about Russia, but there also were frequent reports about how badly the war in Iraq was going for George W. Bush, or how deeply Ukrainians and Georgians regretted their revolutions. There also were the more extreme features that would come to define Russia Today in the West, such as the prophecies of fringe authors who predicted a 55 percent chance of civil war and the dissolution of the United States into six distinct territories by July 2010.

From the start, Simonyan presided over a staff that wasn’t much older than she was, and today the network still has the feel of a high school newspaper with more money and considerably higher stakes. “We look for young people and educate them on the job,” says twenty-nine-year-old Irakly Gachechiladze, Russia Today’s news director. Native-level English is a must for presenters (in high school, Simonyan spent a year on an exchange program in Bristol, New Hampshire), and early on the network had a predilection for posh British accents. Brits made up the vast majority of the initial seventy-two foreigners RT recruited, through advertisements in the *Guardian* and other British papers.

Most of the foreigners were quite green. They were typically just out of one-year journalism graduate programs and had little practical experience. They were aggressively wooed, with a package that included health insurance, free housing, and hands-on experience that would have been impossible with the entry-level jobs available to them at home. And the money was good; foreign hires with little to no experience were paid in the low six figures for working five days out of every fourteen.

For many, it was the opportunity of a lifetime. “They put me in a correspondent shift right away,” says one former Russia Today presenter whose contract did not allow her to speak

on the record. "Within the first week, I was sent to several locations in Russia. I had just graduated with a master's in journalism and I was super eager to get my feet wet." It was an exciting place to work. "There were lots of young people," the former staffer says. "The mood was very eager, very fun. It had a real start-up feel to it."

But despite the network's favored status at home, Russia Today attracted little attention abroad, where it had to compete with behemoths like BBC and Al Jazeera, whose budgets dwarfed RT's. (The channel's budget was just \$30 million the first year, but it grew in subsequent years before taking a hit during the global economic crisis that began in 2008. RT officials won't provide specifics on the current budget, but the Kremlin has announced that it intends to spend \$1.4 billion this year on international propaganda.) Beyond its budgetary limitations, there are the strictures of loosely defined Kremlin dogma. "On one hand, Russia Today is supposed to compete with Xinhua and Al Jazeera," says Masha Lipman, an analyst with the Moscow Carnegie Center. "On the other hand, it has to show a positive image of Russia, and, if you're competing with Al Jazeera, this second function gets in the way." In other words, to compete in the global news arena, even against outlets with a clear point of view, you need to be taken seriously.

"WE GOT IT RIGHT. WE ARE THE ONLY ONES WHO GOT IT right," says Peter Lavelle, the host of *CrossTalk*, RT's version of *Crossfire*. "For months, we had been covering the border, and the day Saakashvili started the war the world woke up."

Lavelle is sitting on a shaded bench in the courtyard of the RIA headquarters, smoking a Camel as some colleagues play ping-pong and bounce on a trampoline behind him. Hired by Russia Today in 2005, Lavelle spent over a decade living in Poland before moving to Russia in 1997. "I didn't like it at first, it was a mess," he says. But he stayed, becoming a vocal defender of Russia against critics around the world. He hasn't been to the U.S. since 2001 because, he says, "I have had no reason."

In the courtyard, Lavelle is talking about the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia over the breakaway Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. When the fighting started, the Russian military and foreign ministry closed ranks and, drawing on lessons from the second Chechen war, barred foreign reporters from entering the war zone. Commentary from Russian government sources was sparse. Meanwhile, Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili was ubiquitous, finding time to speak to every Western press outlet (his personal mobile number was widely circulated among journalists) and even to hold a joint press conference with then U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

The result was Western coverage that portrayed the Russians as autocratic aggressors against a weak, democratic Georgia. For the Russians, who insist that the Georgians fired the opening salvo, it was precisely the kind of anti-Russian reporting by the world's press that Russia Today was created to counteract. A European Union report, issued more than a year after the war ended, lent some credence to the Rus-

sian complaint, stating that, while the Russians went too far in their response, the Georgians had "started an unjustified war." By that point, though, the world's attention had shifted elsewhere and the Russians' sense of injustice remained.

The Ossetian War, as it's known here, was Russia Today's crucible. Especially in the first days of the conflict, when information was patchy and unreliable. RT became exactly what it set out to be: a source of information for the West about what the Russian position actually was. Moreover, it was the only press outlet available to a Western audience that had access to the Russian side of the fighting. The numbers reflected this advantage. According to RT, viewership reached almost 15 million and views of RT broadcasts on YouTube quickly clicked past the one million mark. To this day, RT sees the war as the event that best showcased its abilities as a news organization, and that made it a recognizable brand in the West.

But RT's war coverage was at least as shrill and one-sided as anything the Western press produced. And this, according to people who worked for RT at the time, was a conscious choice. "RT sees it as a triumph, but RT went into a war. It was a P.R. war," says another former RT correspondent who spoke on condition of anonymity. (Staff members were recently compelled to sign papers that barred them from speaking to the press.) "We were told, 'Look at CNN, look at BBC. They've already taken a bias and we have the right to do the same.' There was no room for questioning, for doubt."

Russia Today correspondents in Ossetia found that much of their information was being fed to them from Moscow, whether it corresponded to what they saw on the ground or not. Reporters who tried to broadcast anything outside the

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**During the Georgian war, an RT staffer says, 'We were told, "Look at CNN. They've already taken a bias and we have the right to do the same.'"**

boundaries that Moscow had carefully delineated were punished. William Dunbar, a young RT correspondent in Georgia, did a phone interview with the Moscow studio in which he mentioned that he was hearing unconfirmed reports that Russia had bombed undisputed Georgian territory. After the interview, he "rushed to the studio to do a live update via satellite," he says. "I had been told I would be doing live updates every hour that day. I got a call from the newsroom telling me the live updates had been cancelled. They said, 'We don't need you, go home.'" Another correspondent, whose

reporting departed from the Kremlin line that Georgians were slaughtering unarmed Ossetians, was summoned to the office of the deputy editor in chief in Moscow, where they went over the segment's script line by line. "He had a gun on his desk," the correspondent says.

Even those who were not reprimanded—and were otherwise believers in RT's mission—were uncomfortable with the heavy-handed message control. Irakly Gachechiladze, an ethnic Georgian born in Moscow, had recently been appointed news director when the war began. Despite his staunch loyalty to the channel's official line, he says he was uneasy. "It was not a happy time, obviously," he told me when we met in his office. It was the biggest story anyone there had ever covered, but Gachechiladze politely bowed out. "I packed for the vacation that I had planned a long time in advance, and I left. When I came back, the war was over."

Sophie Shevardnadze, the daughter of Georgia's second president who has a political interview show on RT, took a leave of absence rather than report negatively about her fellow Georgians. "I didn't go to work for three and a half months," she says. "I took unpaid leave and I wasn't even sure if I was going back." The leave was, she says, her editors'

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## With U.S.-Russian relations warming, it raises a pressing question for RT: Is there even a point anymore? Who is the target audience?

proposal. "I had to be on air on the ninth"—the third day of the fighting—"and they called me and they were like, you don't have to do that."

This kind of message control, though rare and targeted to highly sensitive issues, is not exclusive to coverage of the war. The trial of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the oil tycoon and Putin rival, is another example. When an RT reporter took a more balanced approach to covering the trial than RT's previous dispatches, Gachechiladze told the reporter that he was "not playing for the team." "He asked me, 'Why are you still working for this channel?'" the reporter told me. (RT officials deny that this exchange took place.) Another correspondent who pitched a story about the AIDS epidemic in Russia—a taboo topic here—was told it was not a "nice" story and was sent to cover a flower show instead.

Usually, though, the Kremlin line is enforced the way it is everywhere else in Russian television: by the reporters and editors themselves. "There is no censorship per se," says another RT reporter. "But there are a lot of young people at

the channel, a lot of self-starters who are eager to please the management. You can easily guess what the Kremlin wants the world to know, so you change your coverage."

Another criticism often leveled at RT is that in striving to bring the West an alternate point of view, it is forced to talk to marginal, offensive, and often irrelevant figures who can take positions bordering on the absurd. In March, for instance, RT dedicated a twelve-minute interview to Hank Albarelli, a self-described American "historian" who claims that the CIA is testing dangerous drugs on unwitting civilians. After an earthquake ravaged Haiti earlier this year, RT turned for commentary to Carl Dix, a representative of the American Revolutionary Communist Party, who appeared on air wearing a Mao cap. On a recent episode of Peter Lavelle's *CrossTalk*, the guests themselves berated Lavelle for saying that the 9/11 terrorists were not fundamentalists. (The "Truther" claim that 9/11 was an inside job makes a frequent appearance on the channel, though Putin was the first to phone in his condolences to President Bush in 2001.) "I like being counterintuitive," Lavelle told me. "Being mainstream has been very dangerous for the West."

This oppositional point of view was especially clear when RT rolled out a series of ads in the U.K. that featured images of Obama and Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and asked, "Who poses the greater nuclear threat?" or conflated pictures of a polar bear and an alien next to the text: "Climate Change: Science fact or science fiction?" (U.S. airports banned the ads until RT devised more politically correct versions; the original ads, meanwhile, won awards in the U.S. and the U.K.)

Coverage and stunts like these have given RT a bad reputation, especially among other Western journalists working in Russia who see RT not as journalism from the other side's trenches, but as nothing more than Kremlin propaganda. Lavelle sneers at what he sees as supreme naiveté. "The paymaster determines a lot," he says. "Are you telling me Murdoch doesn't control the editorial line of his publications? No one can escape who pays for what." He says he avoids contact with his Western colleagues in Moscow, who are, in turn, supremely contemptuous of most anyone who works for RT. "I am proud of my work," Lavelle told me defiantly.

The younger members of the RT staff, however, are more pragmatic about the potential conflict—whether internal, ideological, or, down the line, professional—of working for RT. The ones who felt it compromised their careers have left; the rest choose to remove lofty ideals like objectivity from the equation. "Maybe people watch us like a freak show," Shevardnadze told me, "but I've never been even slightly embarrassed. This point of view has a right to exist. We don't have the pretension of being like CNN, or being as good as BBC, because we're not. You may totally disagree with what we're doing, and it's meant to be that way." She adds, with a touch of exasperation, "It's a job. They pay you for it."

IN PLANNING AN ELABORATE AND EXPENSIVE IMAGE CAMPAIGN, the Kremlin did not count on a global economic meltdown. A month after the war in Georgia, after a summer of dizzying oil prices, everything fell apart. Russia was among

the worst hit of the G20 nations, and its GDP went from an 8.1 percent annual growth rate in 2007 to negative 7.9 percent in 2009. The price of oil plummeted, as did the prices of other commodities, such as nickel, aluminum, and steel—segments that funded two-thirds of the Russian federal budget. The crisis came as a massive shock to the Kremlin, and a group of liberals inside the administration of Putin's successor Dmitry Medvedev began to push for economic diversification away from dependence on volatile natural resources. But this meant deep budget cuts—including for RT—and, simultaneously, heavy investment in infrastructure, education, and start-ups, all at a time when the Kremlin was suddenly strapped for cash, its reserves significantly depleted after providing industry with a massive bailout.

To fill those gaps, Russia had to woo back international investors who ran for the hills when the fighting broke out in Ossetia. They had to be shown not a resurgent Russia with Soviet overtones, as RT portrayed it, but a reasonable, modern country that behaves rationally. It was, above all, a sales pitch, and a recognition that Russia's conversation with the world was a dialogue, not a monologue.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, bearing an olive branch from the new administration in the form of a large, red "reset" button, could not have shown up at a better time (even if the Americans used the wrong Russian word for "reset," touching off a gleeful round of mockery in the local press). It was March 2009, less than two months after Barack Obama had been sworn into office, promising a different approach toward Russia, one based not on lectures but dialogue. This was an ideal opportunity for the Kremlin: the United States had come to it before it had to go begging. Which is why, after some obligatory chest pounding and naysaying, Moscow began to respond to Washington's overtures, cooperating on initiatives like renewing the START treaty and backing the U.S. on new sanctions against Iran.

Russia Today's coverage has closely mirrored this shift. It has become more international and less anti-American (there are fewer stories about America's social ills, for instance). It even abruptly changed its logo from Russia Today to the less binding "RT," and built a state-of-the-art studio and newsroom in Washington, D.C. From there it beams original content about American politics and society under its new, more journalistic "Question More" banner. Most significantly, coverage of big Russian-American issues hews closely to the Kremlin's new tone. This was evident in the treatment of the recent spy scandal. "We focused on why it is such a big media campaign, we brought on experts to talk about why and how spying happens," says Gachechiladze, the news director. "We talked about the invisible ink. There are a lot of very colorful details. It was a classic spy story." No outrage at the arrest and deportation of Russian citizens, no incredulity at the accusations that Russia was spying on the U.S., just the colorful details, as if the biggest spy swap since the cold war was nothing more than a Hollywood blockbuster. Which, of course, is exactly how Moscow and Washington wanted it.

Simonyan, however, insists that nothing's changed: "Our goal is still to provide unbiased information about Russia to the rest of the world, to report about our country."

But something *has* changed, and it is explained not only by the Russo-American détente, but also by the fact that RT's ambitions have grown. It now boasts a staff of 2,000, wider distribution than ever, and channels in Arabic and Spanish. It has learned to pitch the Kremlin's line in a more subtle way. RT is also evincing a certain confidence these days. It has shed much of its foreign staff, and newsroom meetings are now conducted in Russian. There are hints of a broader, if uneven, move toward seriousness and professionalism.

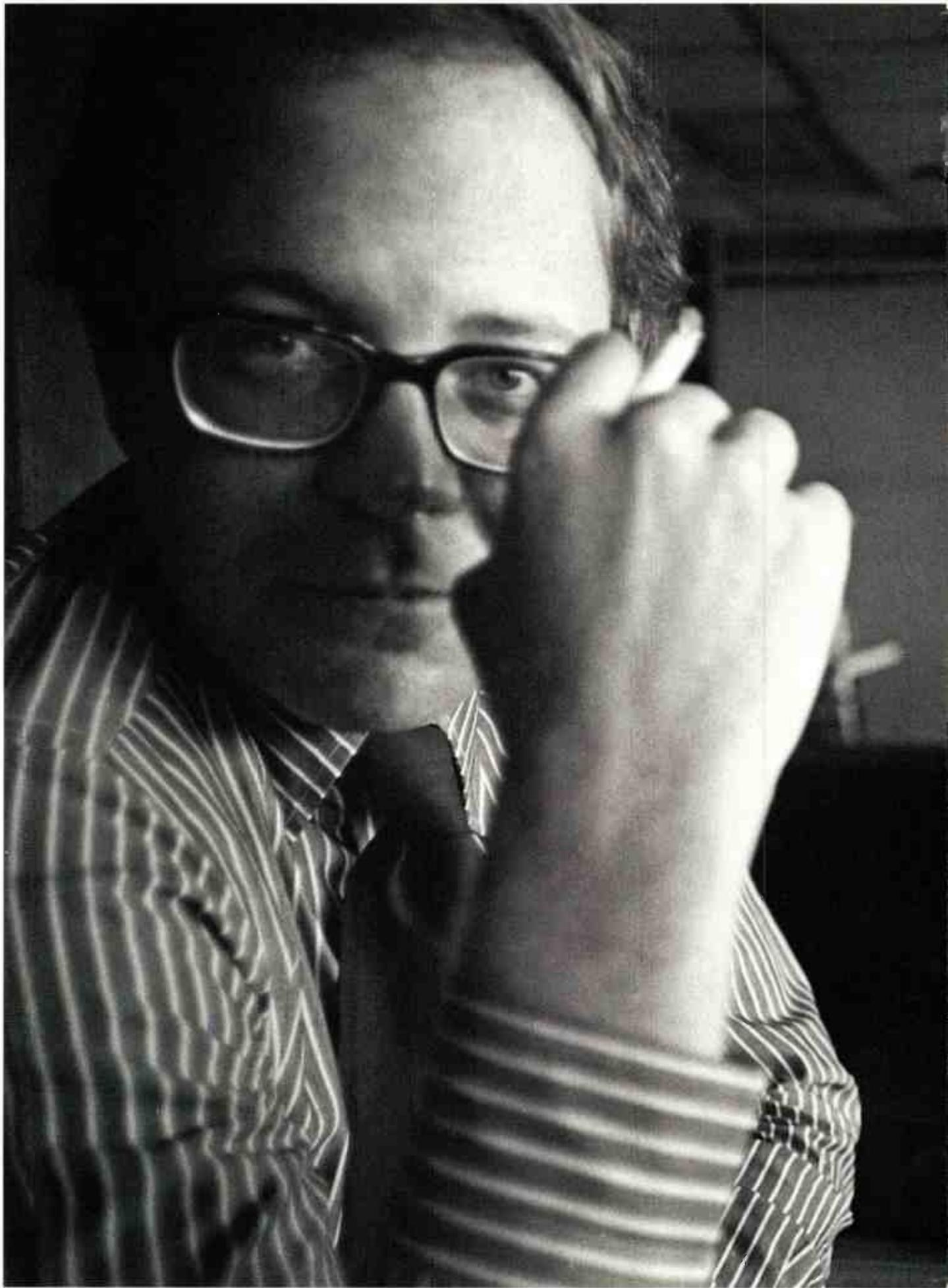
Clearly, the Russia-U.S. "reset" is a game-changer for Russia Today, a fact that was aptly expressed in Alyona Minkovski's diatribe against Glenn Beck. The mission of broadcasting Russia's line to the world was always reminiscent of the old Brezhnev-era foreign policy, when the Soviet Union projected influence either in places America had overlooked, or where America was hated. In other words, it often wasn't about the Soviet Union at all, just as this new effort to project influence isn't necessarily about Russia. Both were about using a common enemy to deflect attention from Russia's own problems, and to gain leverage abroad. This can be effective, until you talk your way into a corner. Now that America is no longer necessarily the enemy, this is exactly what has happened.

For Russia Today—for RT—it raises a pressing question: is there even a point anymore? Increasingly, it is hard to watch RT and not get the sense that the people making the decisions are wrestling with that very question. Even though Russia's relationship with the U.S. will surely have its ups and downs in the coming years, it's unlikely there will be a need for the kind of shrill propaganda outlet that RT has been. So, then, who is RT's target audience? Unlike the Chinese international networks that are tapping into the burgeoning business interest in China, as well as into a large Chinese diaspora, or Al Jazeera, which broadcasts to a broader Islamic universe, Russia can claim neither of these footholds. On the contrary, Russia is still desperately trying to fend off stereotypes of itself—the endemic corruption, the whimsical autocracy of the state—that have kept much foreign capital, and many Russian émigrés, from returning.

But here is the most fundamental problem with Russia's clever attempt to flex its soft power: the Soviet period excepted, Russia has traditionally been a country that has made itself a player on the world stage by insisting on its own importance. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was no ideology to propagate. There is no Islam, no Chinese Communism, no beacon of democracy, no Coca-Cola or MTV to smooth the way for political influence. And in terms of cultural influence, Russia has a mixed bag. Despite its rich and broad cultural contribution (Nabokov, the Bolshoi, Stanislavsky), Russia balks at, and actively fights, other key aspects of its culture: the vodka, the winter, the women. When there's nothing for the propaganda channel to propagate, RT's message becomes a slightly schizophrenic, ad hoc effort to push back against what comes out of the West. And if there's nothing to push back against, other than the ghosts of a bygone era, then what, really, is left to say that others aren't already saying, and saying better? **CJR**

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# Ideas + Reviews



SECOND READ

## What It Was Like

Dispatches told why kids from Ohio came back so 'eerily old'

BY CONNIE SCHULTZ

In the fall of 1978, I was racing through Kent State University's campus bookstore when a thin book, propped in a section where it didn't belong, stopped me in my tracks. The cover was the color of a brown paper bag, with a one-word title in headline type at the top: *Dispatches*. A single blurb, by John le Carré, appeared beneath the title: "The best book I have ever read on men and war in our time."

*In our time.* It had to be about Vietnam. I looked at the bottom for the author's name: Michael Herr. Never heard of him. I turned to the first chapter, called "Breathing In," and started to read its italicized beginning:

*There was a map of Vietnam on the wall of my apartment in Saigon and some nights, coming back late to the city, I'd lie out on my bed and look at it, too tired to do anything more than just get my boots off. That map was a marvel, especially now that it wasn't real anymore.*

I deposited my notebooks on the floor, let my purse slide off my shoulder to join them.

*If dead ground could come back and haunt you the way dead people do, they'd have been able to mark my map current and burn the ones they'd been using since '64, but count on it, nothing like that was going to happen. It was late '67 now, even the most detailed maps didn't reveal much anymore; reading them was like trying to read the faces of the Vietnamese, and that was like trying to read the wind. We knew that the uses of most information were flexible, different pieces of ground told different stories to different people. We also knew that for years now there had been no country here but the war.*

I don't remember how much I read before I bought *Dispatches*. Fellow asthmatics will likely understand why, more than thirty years later, I can still easily remember shorter and shorter breaths, working myself up to a low-grade wheeze by the time I came to the non-italicized text on the fourth page: "A couple of rounds fired off in the dark a kilometer away and the Elephant would be there kneeling on my chest, sending me down into my boots for a breath."

The image of that elephant forces a palm to my chest even now, reminding me to breathe. Perhaps that is where I stopped reading in 1978, and decided to take the book home, where I wouldn't be surrounded by strangers.

Issues that push and pull at us in equal measure are the ones most likely to haunt us. Vietnam was, and is, one of those ghosts for me—because of my roots, not my politics. Ohio, where I grew up, ranked fifth in the number of war casual-

ties in Vietnam. Twenty-six of the servicemen who died came from my home county of Ashtabula, which was full of farmers who hoped to hand off the land to their sons, and working-class boys hoping to graduate from high school and follow their dads into factories that produced rubber, steel, and automobiles. But hope took a holiday in neighborhoods like ours during the war. By the

to answer. She listened for a few moments, and started to cry. "He's alive!" she yelled, "He's alive." She later said his air mattress had been shot out from under him. I pictured him lying on one of those colorful rafts swimmers used on Lake Erie, and thought Vietnam must be one crazy place.

More than 2 million Americans served in Vietnam. Ohio lost 3,094 of

girl and we didn't "do war." No, I wanted to understand what had happened to the boys in my hometown, and why my childhood seemed so different from that of the kids who grew up in neighborhoods full of college deferments. Six pages in, I knew Herr had answers that would likely mess with my head for a long, long time.

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## Sometimes I'd look at my friends' older brothers sitting on their front porches and their stares would scare me... I'd scamper off, full of questions my father warned me never to ask.

late 1960s, it seemed you couldn't drive three blocks in any direction without passing the house of a boy who had gone to Vietnam. Neighbors would take over potluck and beer the night before these boys boarded the first flights of their lives. They left full of brag and bravado, but so many of them came home spent, and eerily old.

As the war progressed, our small town shifted incrementally, like a ship that slowly starts to tilt with an uneven load. First, we knew one boy who left. Then we knew another. Soon, Mom was writing notes to other mothers every week, it seemed, filling them with words of encouragement or sympathy in her careful backhand script. I was in the middle phase of a child's life—too young to know everything, too old to know nothing at all. I would be sitting in school with twenty other fifth-graders, and suddenly a classmate would be called into the hall. The assumption was always that another family had gotten bad news from the war.

One time it was our family, but after a really bad scare, the news was good. My cousin Norman was in Vietnam, and for some reason, Mom knew there was a chance that he had been shot. I still remember the call that came two days later. I was sitting on the sofa when the phone rang and my mother rushed

them. The rest of our boys came home, but the ship never righted. Guys I'd known my entire life weren't fun, or funny, anymore. No more teasing, no big brother reprimands to get out of the street and quit picking on the little ones. Sometimes I'd look at my friends' older brothers sitting on their front porches and their stares would scare me. I'd look in their eyes and get goose bumps. It was as if they thought I was trying to start a fight just by smiling at them. I'd scamper off, full of questions my father warned me never to ask.

By 1978, I was a college junior and a journalism major on the same college campus where Ohio National Guardsmen had opened fire at an anti-war protest in 1970, killing four students and wounding nine others. I spent most of my days at the student newspaper, *The Daily Kent Stater*, where a wall of windows overlooked Blanket Hill. Until I went to college, I thought everyone knew at least one person who'd fought in Vietnam. About six weeks into my freshman year, I stopped asking.

All this may explain why I was eager on that day in 1978 to read Herr's ferocious account of his year in Vietnam, where he went (in le Carré's phrase) "to the limit in order to make himself a part of the monstrosity he visited." But I was scared, too. Not because I was a

IT'S ALMOST HARD TO REMEMBER THE parched terrain of literature and movies about the Vietnam War when *Dispatches* was released in 1977. David Halberstam's 1969 book, *The Best and the Brightest*, was a widely respected critique of the war, but he focused on the political and military decision-makers who led us into the quagmire. The only well-known movie about Vietnam was John Wayne's *The Green Berets*, an anti-communist screed made in 1968, in large part because Wayne wanted to beef up lagging support for the war. Writing in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Roger Ebert denounced the film as "propaganda":

[It] simply will not do as a film about the war in Vietnam. It is offensive not only to those who oppose American policy but even to those who support it. At this moment in our history, locked in the longest and one of the most controversial wars we have ever fought, what we certainly do not need is a movie depicting Vietnam in terms of cowboys and Indians. That is cruel and dishonest and unworthy of the thousands who have died there.

A string of compelling movies would come out a decade after Wayne's, including *Coming Home* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979), which Herr helped write. (In 1987, he would also contribute to the script of *Full Metal Jacket*.) But as far as popular culture goes, Vietnam was still, if not a blank canvas, a painting without form the year that *Dispatches* hit the shelves.

Critics immediately hailed it as the story of the real Vietnam War, the one told from the view of the grunts on the ground, rather than politicians or military commanders thousands of miles away. Hunter S. Thompson said that Herr "puts all the rest of us in the shade." Novelist Robert Stone, reviewing Dexter Filkins's 2008 book *The For-*



ever War in *The New York Times Book Review*, declared Herr's book "the most brilliant exposition of the cultural dimension of an American war ever compiled." John Leonard praised it in an idiom closer to the author's: "It is as if Dante had gone to hell with a cassette recording of Jimi Hendrix and a pocketful of pills: our first rock-and-roll war, stoned murder."

Herr, who never trained as a journalist, originally went to Vietnam for *Esquire*, but wrote only one story for the magazine during his time there. In his book, he vacillates between scared-out-of-his-bones humility and the occasional, arrogant conviction that, unlike some of the pretty-boy journalists, he was there for the right reasons.

"I could skip the daily briefings," he recalls. Then he continues: "I honestly wanted to know what the form was for those interviews, but some of the reporters I'd ask would get very officious, saying something about 'Command postures,' and look at me as if I was insane. It was probably the kind of look that I gave one of them when he asked me once what I found to talk about with the grunts all the time, expecting me to confide (I think) that I found them as boring as he did."

Other times, Herr sounds far less confident.

"There wasn't a day when someone didn't ask me what I was doing there," he writes. What got him to Vietnam in the first place, he insists, was "the crude but serious belief that you had to be able to look at anything, serious because I acted on it and went, crude because I didn't know, it took the war to teach it, that you were responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did."

It took about six years for Herr to write his book. He was candid about the reasons why in a 1992 interview with Eric James Schroeder in his book *Vietnam, We've All Been There: Interviews with American Writers*. (Schroeder lifted the first part of his title from the last line in *Dispatches*.)

"I was pretty crazy when I came back," he told Schroeder. "For a long time I was, in fact, very crazy. Sometimes I was crazy in a very public way, and after I crashed I was crazy in a very

private way. . . . I always believed that there was another door on the other side of me that I could go through and come out of with a book under my arm."

He wrote the first and last chapters, then filled in the middle. It was not, he said, a book about the war. "If somebody were to ask me what it was about, I would say that the secret subject of *Dispatches* was not Vietnam, but that it was a book about writing a book," Herr confessed. "I think that all good books are about writing."

Three years after *Dispatches* was published, Herr moved to London, where he lived for more than a decade. His initial success seemed to have taken a toll on the author. When Paul Ciotti interviewed him for the *Los Angeles Times* in 1990, he described "one of the strangest careers of a contemporary American writer. [Herr] refused to grant interviews. He gave up his once-compulsive world travels and became a dedicated homebody and family man, trading drugs for Gauloises and acid rock for Mozart. He let his leisurely output slow to such a glacial pace that it looked as though he had fallen off the literary radar screen..."

Herr didn't go completely silent. He wrote two more books: a novel about Walter Winchell in 1990, and a 15,000-

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## Herr's book changed the way we talked about Vietnam.

word essay about Stanley Kubrick that morphed into a slim biography in 2000. But neither won even a fraction of the praise and attention that had been heaped on his debut.

There are many quotable nuggets from *Dispatches*. "Conventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it," is an oft-quoted favorite. "There's nothing so embarrassing as when

things go wrong in a war," is another. These one-liners are clever. They're quoted because they're short and snappy, but they don't reflect why *Dispatches* changed the way we talked about Vietnam. For a better sense of the book's impact, consider this passage on the many ways a man could die:

You could die in a sudden bloodburning crunch as your chopper hit the ground like dead weight, you could fly apart so that your pieces would never be gathered, you could take one neat round in the lung and go out hearing only the bubble of the last few breaths, you could die in the last stage of malaria with that faint tapping in your ears, and that could happen to you after months of firefights and rockets and machine guns. Enough, too many, were saved for that, and you always hoped that no irony would attend your passing. You could end in a pit somewhere with a spike through you, everything stopped forever except for the one or two motions, purely involuntary, as though you could kick it all away and come back. You could fall down dead so that the medics would have to spend half an hour looking for the hole that killed you, getting more and more spooked as the search went on. You could be shot, mined, grenaded, rocketed, mortared, sniped at, blown up and away so that your leavings had to be dropped into a sagging poncho and carried to Graves Registration, that's all she wrote. It was almost marvelous.

Herr's book was as unfiltered as a private journal, and as honest as a man on his deathbed. Sometimes he wrote in cool and measured prose, like a hip historian. Most of the time, he raced across the page like the men he described as "talking in short violent bursts as though they were afraid they might not get to finish." Perhaps he was always like that; more likely, he eventually absorbed the grunts' cadences as his own. Thirty years after reading the book for the first time, I still have the same gut response: at least I understand why I will never understand what happened to our boys in Vietnam. That may sound like small consolation to those who don't remember the war, but the realization that some horrors are beyond my comprehension liberated me from a guilt I

couldn't name at twenty-one, and still struggle with now.

Back in 1978, I read Herr's book in one sleepless night. I thought about it for a couple of days, read it again. Then I mailed my copy of *Dispatches* to my parents with a note pleading that they read it. Weeks passed, and I finally called. My mother said she couldn't read it because it was making her cry too much. Dad wouldn't even pick it up. To him, *Dispatches* was 260 pages of reasons why they'd sent me away to college. If we learned anything in our blue-collar town, in our factory worker's family, it was that college kids were special, they were protected, they got away with things. Like war, for example.

Nearly 80 percent of those who fought in Vietnam came from rural and blue-collar families. My mother and father would end up dying in their sixties after working hard to make sure they changed the odds for their four kids. In 1978, I was only the first to go to college. Dad, who often worked double shifts at a power plant on Lake Erie, had no time to look back, and no interest in Michael Herr's version of America.

I said earlier that I had to find my courage to read *Dispatches* back then. As it turned out, I needed to find a different kind of courage to reread it in 2010. I knew to brace for its relentless loop of gore and terror, but I didn't remember many of the specifics, and this time they clawed at my heart, and my conscience. Fatally wounded boys cry for their mothers. A man wraps his wife's oatmeal cookie in foil, plastic and three pairs of socks to keep it safe for months in the jungle.

And sometimes, numbers speak horrible truths. The National Archives rank Vietnam casualties by age. Of the dead, 9,705 were twenty-one; 14,095 were twenty; and 8,283 were nineteen.

Twelve of them were only seventeen.

I am no longer a young college student struggling to imagine such things. I am a middle-aged wife and mother who knows life is unspeakably better when all of your children have already lived longer than the majority of the men who died in Vietnam. I am the grandmother of a two-year-old boy, born in a country fighting two wars with no end in sight.

THERE'S A FOOTNOTE TO MICHAEL Herr's story, and it's a big one. As a journalist, I was taken aback to discover that, while *Dispatches* was published as nonfiction, Herr always thought of it as a novel. "I don't think that it's any secret that there is talk

I wonder if the critics would have been harsher to Herr had they known of his errors and inventions before writing their reviews. Even if we read it as fiction. *Dispatches* is a work of enormous power, but would its sense of urgency and loss be diminished?

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**I have never had the guts to cover a war. I have neither the right nor the will to pass judgment on how Herr brought home the war to millions of Americans who had yet to face it.**

in the book that's invented," he told Schroeder. "But it is invented out of that voice that I heard so often and that made such penetration into my head. . . . I don't really want to go into that no-man's-land about what really happened and what didn't really happen and where you draw the line. Everything in *Dispatches* happened for me, even if it didn't necessarily happen to me." Later, he adds:

There are errors of fact in the book. I'm not happy about this. When the Khe Sahn piece was published [as an essay before the book], I had a really beautiful letter from a colonel who had been stationed there; he corrected me on various points of fact. I lost the letter, and it didn't turn up again until after the book was in print. . . . I couldn't bear to go in and make the revisions myself. I was tapped out. I was exhausted from the project. Including the year in the war, I had spent eight years working on it, and I just couldn't do any more.

It's doubtful that Herr could have pulled this off in our current climate of online fact-checkers and self-anointed "citizen journalists." It is too easy to imagine Sergeant So-and-So from Cleveland, Mississippi, yelling on FOX News, "I was on the Langvei attack, and Mr. Herr is lying!" Or an anonymous blogger posting "Top Ten Reasons Michael Herr is a Traitor;" followed by 413 comments, 390 of them irrelevant to the post at hand.

Not for me. I have never had the guts to cover a war, and doubt I could ever risk my safety, and my sanity, as Herr did when he was in Vietnam. I have neither the right nor the will to pass judgment on how he brought home the war to millions of Americans who had yet to face it. And ultimately, whatever its flaws may be as straight journalism, his book is a tribute to the young men he met in Vietnam. In the 2001 documentary, *First Kill*, it's clear that Herr was unable to forget them: "It's their voices. It's their amazing eloquence. My book is full of them. You know, that's really what my book is. These guys were semi-demi-literate kids from a really unfavorable social background, who just had such a dignity. I couldn't help but find that really moving, and really persuasive."

Michael Herr was changed by what he saw, and what he endured. I am grateful that he lived to tell the tale, that he survived to write simple descriptions like this one: "He was the kind of kid that would go into the high-school gym alone and shoot baskets for the half-hour before the basketball team took it over for practice, not good enough yet for the team but determined."

Sounds like half the boys I knew. Until they went to Vietnam. **CJR**

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# Error, Folly, and Reversal

*Strategic steps and missteps, from Pearl Harbor to Iraq*

BY BARRY STRAUSS

IF THOSE WHO FORGET THE PAST ARE condemned to repeat it, those who remember the past are at risk of misreading it. Facts are one thing, interpretations another. Professional historians know this; when asked to reveal the lessons of the past, they tend toward reticence. But historians have the luxury of reflection. Politicians need to act, so they often appropriate the past boldly, but not always wisely.

So John W. Dower reminds us in this big and ambitious book. Dower, a distinguished historian of the Pacific war, whose many honors include the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, turns here to an exercise in comparative analysis. He aims at understanding the decisions that the American government made after the attacks of 9/11—to his mind, monstrously mistaken decisions—in the light of Japan's misjudgment in attacking Pearl Harbor in 1941. He looks at the strange and fateful appropriation of atomic-bomb language ("Ground Zero") that sprang up in 2001 as a way of describing the attack on the World Trade Center. He examines the way misperceptions and untruths about the occupation of Germany and Japan after World War II warped the American occupation of Iraq after America's illusory battlefield success in 2003.

Naturally, these topics stir today's passions, and Dower looses his share of fiery arrows. If your taste, like mine, does not run to *George Bush in Hell*, you might at times find the temperature uncomfortably warm. That is a small price to pay for a provocative and expert treatment of the use and abuse of historical memory. This is a big subject and a worthy one for a scholar of Dower's eloquence and erudition.

The future, said Thucydides, will resemble the past. No doubt, but "resemble" leaves much room for debate. One man's history lesson is another man's trap. Take, for example, Julius Caesar. In 49 B.C. he crossed the Rubicon, invaded Italy and started a civil war. To win Romans' hearts and minds, he played on their historical memories. Unlike rogue generals of the past who made rivers of blood flow, Caesar deliberately spared civilians and pardoned his enemies. That made a splendid impression and won him supporters, but it also left his antagonists free. They paid him kindness back with twenty-three stab wounds on the Ides of March.

If no less a figure than Caesar found Clio, the muse of history, a cruel mis-

## Cultures of War:

### **Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, 9/11, Iraq**

By John W. Dower  
W. W. Norton & Company  
640 pages, \$29.95

tress, then it's no surprise that Japanese emperors and American presidents have made similar stumbles. After all, Hirohito and his ministers might have reasoned that a sneak attack on the Russian Far East Fleet at Port Arthur had worked splendidly in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. Why not try it again at Pearl Harbor? Conventional "shock and awe" tactics had sent Saddam's army packing from Kuwait in 1991, so surely they could open a quick road to Baghdad in 2003.

The Bush administration reached the latter conclusion and imagined that a relatively peaceful and effective occupation would follow. They seem to have forgotten that to render Germany and Japan relatively docile after 1945, the Allies first had to destroy their cities from the air and grind up a generation of young men in battles on land and sea. The American invaders couldn't do that in 2003, because they wanted to win the support of the Iraqi people. So, as brutal as the invasion of Iraq was—all invasions are brutal—it was mild compared to the destruction of Germany and Japan. The Iraqis still had plenty of fight left in them after President Bush's premature declaration of "mission accomplished." No wonder many of them showed their gratitude to American "liberators" with the modern equivalent of raised daggers.

Dower challenges comparisons that seemed natural when they were first made. In 2001, for example, people immediately thought of the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, since the 9/11 attacks achieved complete strategic surprise on American soil. But in other ways, the 9/11 attacks were not at all like Pearl Harbor, which focused on military targets. On 9/11, only the Pentagon was a military target; the World Trade Center was a civilian complex, and the Capitol or White House (the likely site of the third, failed assault) are both governmental buildings. More important, the 9/11 attacks were terror attacks: their main target was American morale, not the nation's material strength. Pearl Harbor, too, aimed at shocking Americans, but its primary target was the U.S. Pacific Fleet.

The comparison between Hiroshima and 9/11 brings out the best in Dower's analysis. Ours is an age of hype. It's no



surprise, really, that the World Trade Center site was dubbed "Ground Zero," with reference to Hiroshima and Nagasaki (and test sites in New Mexico), even though the death and destruction of the atom bomb dwarfed that of the Twin Towers. Or maybe it wasn't all hype. As Dower points out, "Ground Zero" underlined fears that 9/11 was just a foretaste of worse to come. The anthrax scare of 2001 raised the specter of biological warfare. The threat of weapons of mass destruction loomed large in the Bush administration's case for war with Iraq. Visions of terrorists armed with suitcase bombs still inform our arguments about whether and how to disarm the Iranian nuclear project.

As Dower eloquently argues, Americans have forgotten the reality of the terror that American airmen once launched from the skies over Germany and Japan. They were less skittish about it at the time, as Dower shows. Decades of peace have faded memories and softened mores. Today's Americans might countenance a certain degree of "collateral damage" in Iraq, but they would not stand for a strategy of directly targeting civilians, as they did during World War II or Korea. The events of 9/11 brought home to them, perhaps as nothing else ever had, that they too were vulnerable to the tactics they had once used on others. (To be sure, Americans did not originate those tactics; it is unfortunate that Dower has so little to say about the terror that Japan unleashed over China, or Germany over England.) To protect themselves, Americans were willing to engage in foreign wars that they never would have supported before 9/11. Enter the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Whatever one thinks of those wars, one could not argue that American plans went smoothly. Like Japan in 1941, the United States adopted flawed strategies. Dower uses the comparative perspective to try to understand why. In the case of Japan and especially the United States, Dower blames poor leadership. The Bush administration, of course, placed too much stock in shock-and-awe tactics. It did not prepare for the likelihood of a guerrilla war, and it had little appreciation of the realities of occupying Iraq. Dower argues persuasively that the administration was chasing the will o' the

wisp of a World-War-II style campaign: it fell for its own metaphors.

Dower also leans heavily on the notion that bad strategies are the result of what he calls "faith-based reasoning." That is a non-starter. Historically, neither faith nor fanaticism has stood in the way of strategic success. Consider only the triumphs of Constantine or the Crusaders or Cromwell. Or think of the armies of early Islam, which swept out of Arabia in 634 C.E. and, within a century, conquered an empire that stretched from Pakistan in the east to Spain in the west. Neither Japan's emperor cult nor George Bush's evangelical Christianity nor Osama Bin Laden's Islamism can explain strategic failure.

The author is on firmer ground when he criticizes groupthink. Neither the Tojo government nor the Bush administration paid enough attention to dissenting voices. The Japanese underes-

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## Like Japan in 1941, the United States adopted flawed strategies.

timated American resolve. The White House and its supporters were maddeningly arrogant for years in their unwillingness to see that their strategy in Iraq was not working.

Dower quotes Samuel Eliot Morison's verdict on Japan's decision to go to war against the United States: "strategic imbecility." He suggests that much the same could be said about the American decision to go to war against Iraq. In both cases, the judgment is too harsh. After all, the Japanese might have made a success of Pearl Harbor, as Dower himself points out. If the two American aircraft carriers that had been at sea on December 7 had been in port, then the Japanese would have destroyed them. If, in addition, they had targeted the American supply depot at Pearl Harbor instead of leaving it alone, the Japanese would have dealt a big blow to the American war effort. There would have been no American vic-

tory at Midway Island in June 1942. Instead, the Japanese would have occupied the island and consolidated their earlier gains. In fact, they might have been able to build up enough power to bring the Americans to the negotiating table. To be sure, the Japanese would have been better off with another strategy altogether: namely, convincing their German allies to join them in a drive on British India. That might have avoided, or at least delayed, the twin disasters of Japan's attack on the United States and Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union.

Japan's gamble in December 1941 led it to misery and defeat in less than four years. In the case of America's troubled war in Iraq, the genius of the American constitutional system eventually kicked in. After the shock-and-awe campaign of March 2003 and the ouster of Saddam Hussein, there were chaos, guerrilla warfare, and American governmental floundering. The voters responded by turning Congress over to the Democrats, and that led Bush to change course. He selected a new commanding general who waged a successful counterinsurgency campaign. The Republicans went on to lose the White House. Meanwhile, the new Iraq that emerged may be rather worse for wear, but it survives. That's a far cry from the rubble and humiliation that the Japanese government reaped from Pearl Harbor.

Still, the American-led war in Iraq remains a textbook case of error, folly, and reversal. Shocking, until one realizes that so are most wars. Most plans fail once they are put into action. The difference between success and failure is often the ability to adapt quickly to the likelihood of error and disappointment. No wonder that Cicero said a successful general needs to have four qualities: military expertise, courage, authority—and luck.

Wisdom is missing from the list, but Cicero expected statesmen to provide that. As for the wisdom (or lack thereof) of recent American statesmanship, readers will find much to ponder in Dower's stimulating and impressive book. **CJR**

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BY JAMES BOYLAN



**Selling War in a Media Age: The Presidency and Public Opinion in the American Century**

Edited by Kenneth Osgood and Andrew K. Frank  
Afterword by David Halberstam  
University Press of Florida  
278 pages, \$44.95

TWO HISTORIANS—KENNETH Osgood from Florida Atlantic University and Andrew K. Frank from Florida State—have brought together ten essays by fellow scholars on how presidents led (or misled) the United States into wars large and small, hot and cold. Some of the articles are primarily studies in the twists and turns of presidential rhetoric. Osgood, for example, notes that Cold War presidents used the term “peace” in public statements 9,888 times, most often while promoting war. The more venturesome articles describe the interplay between presidents, federal bureaucracies, the media, and pressure groups. Emily S. Rosenberg recalls the massive efforts by the Wilson administration to smother a nation divided over World War I in prowar propaganda, while suppressing every symptom of dissent, with imprisonment if necessary. Marilyn B. Young examines the Korean War, sixty years old this year, noting both Truman’s failure to offer a credible rationale for being in the war and the degree to which Americans ignored and continue to ignore the brutal behavior of all the armies involved, despite the gritty work of American



war correspondents. Chester Pach retells the story of the struggle to control the Vietnam scenario, with the Johnson administration attacking journalists on the scene as disloyal. He offers lively interviews with several correspondents of that era, who recount how the reality of the war sank in after they arrived in country. (The text of a lecture by David Halberstam, who died in 2007 before he completed an article for this anthology, briskly reviews his parallel Vietnam experiences.) Lloyd Gardner provides a harsh account of the selling of the great twofor: two Gulf Wars by two Bushes. And at the end, Robert J. McMahon asks whether it is ever possible for a president to nudge the nation toward war without lying. And if he does, is it sometimes all right? Most of these authors would vote no.

**The Publisher: Henry Luce and His American Century**

By Alan Brinkley  
Alfred A. Knopf  
531 pages. \$35

AFTER THE DEATH IN 1967 of its founder, Henry R.

Luce, *Time* declared him (with Lucean hyperbole) to have been “America’s greatest maker of magazines” and his publications to be “a valued and trusted voice of America throughout the free world.” More than forty years later, Alan Brinkley, heretofore

primarily a historian of New Deal-era politics, delivers a fresh assessment in *The Publisher: Henry Luce and His American Century*. Luce’s reputation has not fared particularly well at the hands of his previous biographers. In William Swanberg’s *Luce and His Empire* (1972) and David Halberstam’s *The Powers That Be* (1979), the publisher appears as a garden-variety, power-hungry tycoon (a word that *Time* popularized), who bent his journalism to fit his politics. James L. Baughman’s *Henry R. Luce and the Rise of the American News Media* (2001) is equally critical but more scholarly and incisive. Brinkley seeks to set aside the accumulated animus and make sense of how a self-conscious but determined son born in China to missionary parents came to be the creator of at least three new journalistic genres: the concise, stylish news magazine (*Time*); the high-end business magazine, aimed at educating America’s Babbitts (*Fortune*); and the popular magazine of photographic journalism (*Life*). Brinkley also exam-

ines how Luce attempted to transform himself into a statesman, an international herald of American values, a would-be counsel to presidents he happened to like, and an advocate for a non-Communist China—and how he fell a bit short in each of these roles. The author persistently probes to find the man under the trappings. Luce was a loner with few close friends and the partner in an unhappy second marriage to the celebrity writer-politician Clare Boothe—which made him a consistent seeker of the companionship of other, more compatible women. These are dimensions little touched upon by previous biographers, and they add much to readers’ understanding. On the other hand, his concentration on Luce the private man means that Brinkley slights the intense office warfare and ideological skirmishing at Time Incorporated. Of Luce’s legacy, he writes: “Like all powerful media, Luce’s innovations had their day and then slowly lost their centrality as newer forms of communication took their place. And while his company survives still, far larger and wealthier than it was in Luce’s lifetime, little remains of the goals and principles he established for it.” CJR

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# Keeping Secrets

*How censorship has (and hasn't) changed since World War II*

BY PETER DUFFY

ON DECEMBER 16, 1941, NINE DAYS AFTER THE JAPANESE BOMBED PEARL HARBOR, President Franklin D. Roosevelt stood before the White House press corps and read from a prepared statement. He announced to the assembled reporters that they were, in a sense, getting a new boss. The executive news editor of The Associated Press, Byron Price, had been named the country's "Director of Censorship."

FDR seemed aware of the disquieting implications of the appointment. "When Roosevelt came to Price's title, he mumbled," writes Michael S. Sweeney in *Secrets of Victory: The Office of Censorship and the American Press and Radio in World War II*, the definitive account of a largely forgotten episode in American journalistic history. "A reporter asked him to repeat. In a loud voice, Roosevelt said, 'Director of Censorship!'"

Price, fifty, was perhaps the least severe censor in history. Unpretentious and easygoing, he had played the part of a baby in the Gridiron Club's annual show. He was a bad poker player and worse golfer who grew bearded irises and collected Mark Twain first editions. Yet the "Bishop," as he was known around the censorship office, was no pushover. He stood up to government officials who sought a more draconian censorship regime—and challenged those in publishing and broadcasting who complained about the one already in place.

When, for example, the editorial vice president of *Time* protested a ban on the "premature disclosure of diplomatic negotiations," Price wrote a sentence in response that revealed much about how he saw his role as the nation's chief suppressor of information: "Instead of undertaking to break down and destroy the Code and substitute a code of your own, perhaps at the expense of bringing about a national diplomatic defeat which would be as costly as a national military defeat, why not give us a ring in any specific case which may arise."

His statement shows that he regarded adherence to the censorship code—which forbade public discussion of topics like troop and ship movements, war production progress, and the president's travel schedule—as vital to the struggle against the Axis powers. "Censorship's responsibility is to help protect the life of the nation," he wrote in 1945. Yet the communiqué to *Time* also indicates that he understood the system was voluntary and reliant on the good will of journalists.

History has generally looked favorably on Price's performance. At the end of his forty-four months on the job, *The New York Times* praised him as someone who "did his best, usually with success, to see to it that censorship was not unreasonable." His reasonableness won him a special Pulitzer Prize citation in 1944. And the ACLU declared that "almost no issues" were raised during his tenure.

The government was no less pleased. Price's greatest achievement was convincing the Washington columnist and broadcaster Drew Pearson and *Times* reporter William L. Laurence to sit on perhaps the biggest story of the war: the development of the atomic bomb. His reputation was such that nearly twenty years later, during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, Price got a call from President Kennedy, asking if he would be up for a second term as Director of Censorship if a hot war with the Soviet Union broke out.

But Price was lucky to be operating during the era that he did—which, compared to our multimedia age, might as well have been the Mesozoic. His unit monitored just two sources of news, the papers and radio, and was run on a shoestring. While the Office of Censorship had an impressive 13,500 employees, most of them were involved in monitoring postal and cable communications. The press and broadcasting divisions had just sixteen staff members each by the end of 1942. Forty informal "missionaries" throughout the nation helped monitor regional newspapers, but the broadcasting division relied mostly on tips from listeners and the perusal of scripts.

The most noticeable prohibition by far was the ban on "inadvertent references" to the weather, which censors believed could help the enemy pick opportune moments to strike the homeland. It made for some comical moments during sports broadcasts. During a football game in Chicago, the fog was so thick that fans in the stadium couldn't see the action. Play-by-play man Bob Elson showed heroic restraint in never once mentioning the f-word. "This game is being played under the strangest circumstances that I've witnessed in fifteen years of being on the sport scene," he said. Another broadcaster, Hal Totten of WCFL in Chicago, was more cavalier in describing a baseball rainout: "The umpires have called the game for reasons I cannot speak of, but whatever has caused the delay is also making the spectators go back for cover, and, yes, here come the ground keepers with whatever is used to cover the ground so whatever is causing the delay won't affect the ground too much."

There were also occasional loopholes in the guidelines, summed up in



fervent protests from the military. Still, these same reporters who cover the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan regularly withhold information that “might be of aid to the enemy,” as FDR described the heart of the matter in his press conference announcing Price’s appointment.

John Burns of the *Times*, one of the great war correspondents of our era, admitted that he is selective in how he reports on General Patton’s modern successors. “You build up a kind of trust,” he told radio host Hugh Hewitt in July 2010, after a *Rolling Stone* exposé had ended the career of General Stanley McChrystal. “It’s not explicit, it’s just there. And my feeling is that it’s the responsibility of the reporter to judge in those circumstances what is fairly reportable, and what is not—and to go beyond that, what it is *necessary* to report.”

Decades after Price wielded them with such finesse, shame and suasion also retain their power. In 2003, when Geraldo Rivera described an upcoming mission of the 101st Airborne Division by drawing a map in the sand for his FOX News audience, military officials were incensed. The correspondent was widely ridiculed, but it was FOX that voluntarily pulled him from the war zone.

Even when *The New York Times* reported, on December 16, 2005, that President Bush had authorized the National Security Agency to eavesdrop on Americans without court-approved warrants, the newspaper went to great lengths to accommodate the concerns of the administration. The celebrated scoop was withheld for more than a year. In a meeting at the White House, President Bush personally pleaded with *Times* officials to spike it. But in the end the story was published under the headline BUSH LETS U.S. SPY ON CALLERS WITHOUT COURTS. The words had a revelatory ring, not so different from the 1942 headline the *Chicago Tribune* printed above its Midway story: NAVY HAD WORD OF JAP PLAN TO STRIKE AT SEA.

No censor could stop either of them. **CJR**

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a pamphlet called *The Code of Wartime Practices*. On June 7, 1942, the *Chicago Tribune* published one of the most controversial stories of the war. In reporting that American forces were aware of the size of the Japanese attack force at Midway “several days before the battle began,” the piece implicitly revealed that the U.S. military had broken the Japanese operational code. The story was not presented for review to the Office of Censorship because the paper’s Washington bureau chief felt it didn’t violate the code. He was right. Censorship guidelines included no prohibition against reporting on the movement of enemy ships in enemy waters, a slip-up that was rectified in the next edition of the pamphlet.

Meanwhile, government officials were apoplectic over the *Tribune* story. A grand jury was convened to consider charging the newspaper with violating the Espionage Act. It failed to indict when Navy officials didn’t appear at the proceeding for fear of revealing other secrets in their testimony. In any event, the Japanese didn’t seem to notice what all of Washington was buzzing about. They didn’t alter their secret code.

The Office of Censorship had no real power to punish journalists. It could only recommend that the Justice Department investigate possible Espionage Act violations. To keep the press corps in line, Price used the power of shame and suasion. Even when confronted with a German-language broadcaster with apparent Nazi sympathies, Price was unable to remove him by fiat. Instead, he persuaded the station manager that his program was “contrary to the best interests of the nation.” The manager was only too happy to oblige. “If there is anything wrong with the guy, let me know,” he told Price’s staff. “I want to shoot the gun.”

The reporter who protested the code’s restrictions with the greatest vehemence was Pearson, who once said that he operated by sense of smell: “If something smells wrong, I go to work.” He was a kind of progressive Robert Novak with a column in *The Washington Post* and a national Sunday night radio program. He specialized in using anonymous quotes to skewer the nation’s elite, no matter their party affiliation, often with a shaky basis in fact. FDR called him “a chronic liar.” To Truman, he was

an “s.o.b.” Although he complied with Price’s suggestion to keep the atomic bomb secret, Pearson was eager to reveal every other scoop that he discovered.

Not surprisingly, then, no single journalist occupied more of the Office of Censorship’s time. From the beginning, they were watching Pearson—with a little help, as it happens, from *The New York Times*. After a *Times* reporter named Russell B. Porter heard Pearson give precise details about American military losses to a convention of insurance agents, he wrote a memo to his editors. Porter argued that “no one should be allowed to go around the country lecturing to large groups of people at public dinners, or even at one such event, and revealing as ‘inside stuff’ information so secret and so useful to the enemy that the newspapers and radio are not allowed to publish it.” The memo made its way to Arthur Hays Sulzberger, then to Byron Price, and eventually to Attorney General Francis Biddle. The FBI investigated the incident for eight months before closing the file without further action.

This didn’t prevent Pearson from breaking an explosive story less than a year later: he reported that General George S. Patton had slapped the face of a soldier in a military hospital in Sicily who claimed to be suffering from shell shock. (Actually, Patton had similarly assaulted two soldiers on separate occasions.) Pearson was only passing along what the press corps in the field knew but had agreed to suppress at the request of General Dwight D. Eisenhower. In the ensuing controversy, Patton struggled to keep his job and saw his role in the D-Day invasion diminished. Of Pearson, Patton wrote, “I will live to see him die.” (He didn’t.) And what of Byron Price? When the item reached the Office of Censorship prior to broadcast, an official called Price at home and asked for guidance. Price said he didn’t like the story much. But since it didn’t reveal military secrets, he had no authority to spike it.

It would be natural at this point to suggest that journalists in modern America would never subject themselves to a Director of Censorship, even one as gently persuasive as Byron Price. They probably wouldn’t. Certainly they were quick to cover the recent dump of classified documents by WikiLeaks, despite

# Top Gun

*How the Kalashnikov conquered the world*

BY JUDITH MATLOFF

OH, TO IMAGINE THE WORLD WITHOUT the AK-47. Anyone who has lived through (or reported on) a conflict over the past half century has probably encountered some version of the Russian basic assault rifle.

*Avtomat Kalashnikova 47*—the automatic rifle said to have been designed by Mikhail Timofeyevich Kalashnikov and first manufactured in 1947—is the most common sophisticated weapon on earth.

Between the original gun and its variants, there are thought to be one hundred million in circulation. Fifty armies and most rebel movements use them. Durable, and light enough for a child to use, the AK almost never fails.

“In their march from secrecy to ubiquity,” writes C. J. Chivers in *The Gun*, “Kalashnikovs have become more than weapons. They have become symbols—first of the success of Stalin’s Soviet Union and the socialist way, later of popular insurrection, armed liberation, and gangland stature, more recently of jihad. A Kalashnikov can be appropriated for most any cause.”

Even those who have not experienced it firsthand have probably spotted the distinctive banana-shaped clip on television. The Kalashnikov epitomizes revolutionary chic. Every self-respecting militant from Yasir Arafat to Osama Bin Laden has posed with one. The iconic silhouette decorates the flags of Mozambique and various armed groups, including Hezbollah.

C. J. Chivers sets out to explore how this deceptively simple rifle became the most popular firearm ever used, and changed the nature of warfare. Because of its size and reliability, the AK-47 has served as the midwife of small armies and guerrilla forces operating in rough terrain. The Taliban and Colombia’s FARC rebels are only two of its more recent beneficiaries. It is the perfect tool for combatants who rely on ambushes against less mobile forces. According to the United Nations, most of the forty-nine conflicts fought in the 1990s were waged with small arms, which collectively killed four million people. Chivers is right to assume that most of the rifles were AK-47s.

A senior writer for *The New York Times* and former Marine who served in the first gulf war, Chivers is one of the most expert chroniclers of the Afghan and Iraq conflicts. Like his journalism, *The Gun* crackles with eloquence and authority, and

the author excels at showing the human cost of war. (His story for *Esquire* about the 2004 Beslan school hostage siege is one of best articles I’ve ever read on the senseless depravity of violence.)

Yet the title is somewhat of a misnomer. Chivers devotes more space to the precursors of the Kalashnikov, and to its American derivative, the M-16, than he does to the nominal star of the show. This is especially true of the first third of the book, in which Chivers discusses the miniaturization of rapid firearms that preceded the AK-47.

That fascinating story begins in 1862, when American inventor Richard J. Gatling designed the bulky weapon that bears his own name. This behemoth weighed a ton, and had to be dragged on wheels. Yet it could fire continuously, and first saw action toward the end of the Civil War.

Next came the first self-powered machine gun, which the American-born Hiram Maxim developed in 1884. The weapon’s repeated fire facilitated European colonization of lightly protected Africans. By the time World War I rolled around, machine guns operating from trenches rendered bayonet charges obsolete. Germany immediately set to work designing even more transportable weapons, which served them well in the next global conflict—itsself the ultimate advertisement for greater firepower and mobility. The Soviet Union learned this lesson well. The crushing humiliation of the 1941 Nazi invasion convinced the Kremlin to develop a widely issued and easily carried basic automatic.

With the development of the AK-47 itself, the narrative really hits its stride. Chivers debunks the Soviet fable about the weapon’s inventor. According to the official line, Kalashnikov, the humble tank sergeant, dreamed up the perfect fighting tool after being wounded by German forces. Sitting in a hospital bed, he sketched the basic design, without any formal engineering training, which he later presented to the industrial arms complex, where it ultimately won a competition. Kalashnikov was hailed as a proletariat hero, an unlettered farm boy who saved the country. He was swiftly promoted to general and presented with a *dacha*, at a time when most citizens were scrambling to find the basic necessities.

## **The Gun**

By C. J. Chivers  
Simon & Schuster  
496 pages, \$28



In fact, as Chivers painstakingly reconstructs from interviews and archival sources, Soviet propagandists manipulated the story. They neglected to mention the inconvenient fact that their champion actually had lived in Siberian exile as a boy, after his family was blacklisted during Stalin's collectivization campaign. Kalashnikov himself nervously guarded this secret, lest he lose his coveted privileges. More to the point, he did not spontaneously come up with his famous prototype. As Chivers shows, he was simply a cog in the team effort to mass-produce a defensive rifle, and one whose early work was deemed of little promise.

Whatever its provenance, the gun performed better than anything before it. The genius of the design was a loose fit and big parts, which made it less likely to get stuck when dirty. The bore and chamber were chromed to reduce corrosion. During testing, models were dunked in water and buried in sand. The AK held up. It quickly became standard issue for the Red Army and was exported or licensed for knockoffs in the Warsaw Pact countries. Plants producing the AK were subsidized in Bulgaria, Hungary, East Germany, Poland, and Romania.

Eager to expand its influence in the East-West rivalry, the Kremlin later shared blueprints with other friendly countries, such as China, North Korea, and Egypt. Iraq and Cuba acquired licenses for variants.

Chivers damningly chronicles how the Pentagon failed to keep pace with the Russians. While Washington focused on containing the Kremlin's nuclear capability, Moscow was churning out what would become a far more lethal weapon. Meanwhile, the American brass was slow to recognize the Kalashnikov's potential and dismissed it as a primitive submachine gun.

Washington learned its mistake in Indochina, where the Viet Cong showed how guerrillas armed with AKs could wreak havoc on a conventional army. This was a tactical turning point, as well as an object lesson for insurgent groups around the globe. Thanks in part to the Kalashnikov clones provided by China, small VC units could effectively strike the American Goliath and then melt back into the jungle.

Americans responded with the hastily conceived M-16 assault rifle, which was rushed into soldiers' hands too soon and could not hold its own against its hardier nemesis. The M-16 jammed and corroded in the damp jungle. Pinned-down grunts were reduced to brandishing their useless firearms like clubs. Chivers recounts one sickening battle where a quarter of

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## The AK's relatively low price meant that almost anyone could afford it.

a company was unable to fight back. "It was 1967, the age of the nuclear power aircraft carrier, the B-52 Stratofortress and the submarine-launched Polaris ballistic missile," he notes ruefully. "A Marine Corps company commander was preparing his men to wield their rifles like lances, swords, and spears."

So unreliable was the American weapon that some servicemen opted to use captured AKs, despite the risk of being fired on by compatriots because of the rifle's distinctive sound. Eventually the M-16 was upgraded.

Meanwhile, transfers of AK rifles to Arab countries were under way, and the weapon ended up the hands of hostage-takers and militants in the Middle East. At this point, with proliferation no longer in their interest, the Soviets began to lose control of their Frankenstein. Arms smuggling and the gun's relatively low price meant that almost anybody could afford it. The buyers included, paradoxically, Washington's proxies in Africa and Latin America. And the weapon acquired such cachet in some parts of Africa and Afghanistan that obtaining one became a rite of passage for young men. Partygoers would shoot AKs in the air in celebration, or give them away as presents.

The book's final chapters deal with this spread and its lethal consequences. Global circulation soared after the cold war, when stockpiles in the Eastern bloc and newly independent countries

like Ukraine were offloaded by traffickers or officials eager for a buck.

Chivers covers the basics with his customary fluency, but the research here is more broad-brush than in earlier parts of the book. He could have delved deeper, for instance, into how the illicit gun trade increased criminality and weakened democratic institutions around the world. For this I would recommend Larry Kahaner's *AK-47: The Weapon That Changed the Face of War*, which came out in 2006. Kahaner does a fine job of describing how the rifles were recycled from conflict to conflict, and became a form of currency that fomented global trade in narcotics and "blood" diamonds. For example, Kalashnikovs that armed Mozambique's leftist government migrated to South Africa, where they were used to man roadblocks and hijack cars. Mexican drug thugs have inherited some of their guns from Central American insurgencies of the 1980s.

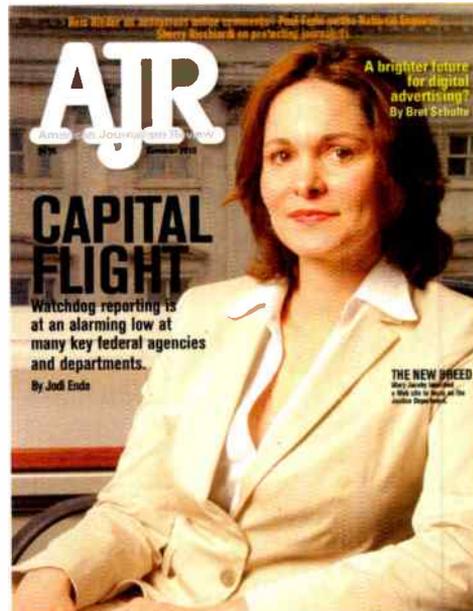
Chivers concludes that the durability of the AK-47 will guarantee its preeminence for years to come. Suicide bombers and homemade explosives may get more attention in the media, but the AK-47 continues to kill more people, he argues. I would agree, having seen the farcical "demobilization" of insurgents in southern Africa. At the end of so many decades of conflict, millions of weapons remained in circulation or ended up in bazaars in nearby countries. U.N. peacekeepers will never succeed in decommissioning them all. They are too sturdy and commonplace.

And what of the weapon's nominal creator? In recent years, Mikhail Timofeyevich Kalashnikov has lamented the bloody legacy of the creation that carries his name. But when he turned ninety last November, he seemed at peace with the past, if one is to believe the government newspaper, *Rossiiskaya Gazetta*. "I feel a happy man," Kalashnikov reportedly said. "As with any person, I have things to regret.... But I can say one thing: I would not live my life again differently if I had the chance." **CJR**

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JUDITH MATLOFF is the author of *Fragments of a Forgotten War*, and teaches conflict reporting at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism.

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