

# COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

Strong Press, Strong Democracy



**REBOOT**

**A media policy for the digital age**  
STEVE COLL

**PLUS:**

**PEOPLE VS. POWER:  
CHINA'S ONLINE  
CHESS MATCH**

HOWARD W. FRENCH

**CAROL ROSENBERG  
OWNS THE GITMO BEAT**

DAVID GLENN

**MY WEEK IN DEMAND**

NICHOLAS SPANGLER

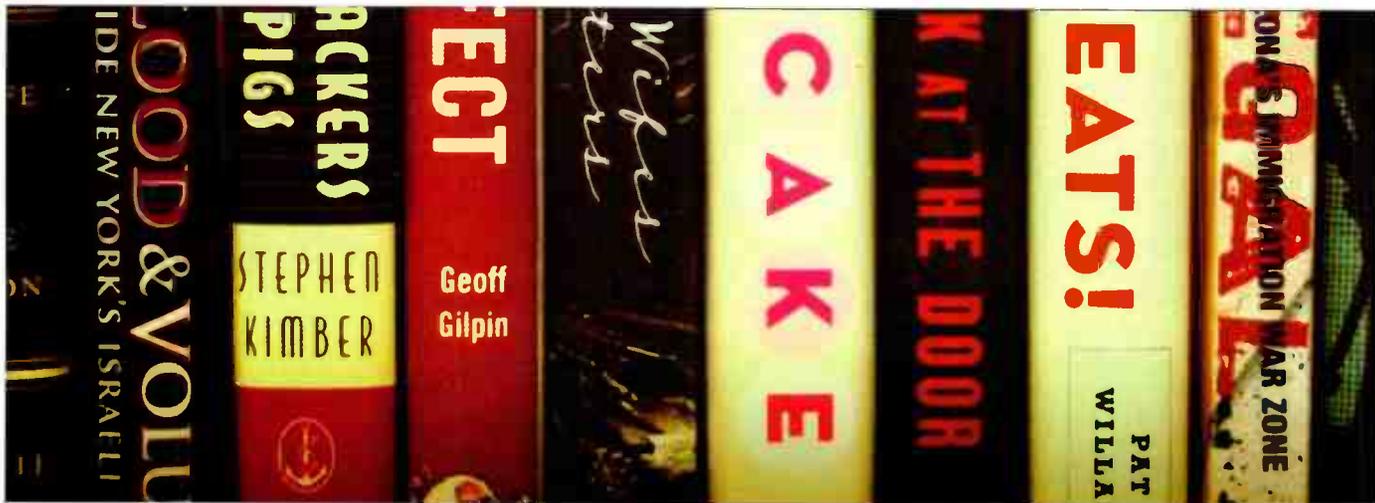
**IAN FRAZIER'S SIBERIAN  
RHAPSODY**

TED CONOVER

NOV / DEC 2010 • CJR.ORG



\$4.95



# RELAX, PRINT ISN'T DEAD.

Not in Goucher College's **MFA in Creative Nonfiction program**, where since 1997 our students and alumni have published more than 50 books—including Mike Capuzzo's recent *New York Times* bestseller, *The Murder Room*. With its unique focus on a single genre and its strong professional emphasis on publishing, the program has gained a reputation as the best in its field.

Goucher's integrated reading-writing-mentoring curriculum will give you the chance to let your narrative talents soar under the guidance of nationally renowned journalists, authors, and editors. And its limited-residency format will enable you to complete your degree—and a 150-page manuscript—in two years. For more information, visit [www.goucher.edu/mfa](http://www.goucher.edu/mfa)



**Tom French**, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author of *Zoo Story: Life and Death in the Garden of Captives*, and **Mike Capuzzo**, 2011 MFA candidate and author of *The Murder Room*, took time out of their Goucher summer residency to compare notes and swap stories. See the video at [www.goucher.edu/cnfvideo](http://www.goucher.edu/cnfvideo).

# COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

November/December 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



Clockwise from top left:  
Click and see **page 16**  
Prison beat **page 35**  
Content farmer **page 51**

## Articles

### COVER STORY

#### 28 REBOOT

How to overhaul America's media infrastructure. An open letter to the FCC.  
*By Steve Coll*

#### 35 THE RECORD KEEPER

For nine years, Carol Rosenberg has covered America's experiment in detention without trial at Guantánamo Bay. She's not done yet.  
*By David Glenn*

#### 41 CHINA'S CHESS MATCH

The web has empowered the people. Their rulers are learning how to fight back.  
*By Howard W. French*

#### 46 AOL AND THE ALGORITHM

The company is hiring hundreds of journalists. What will they produce?  
*By Lisa Anderson*

#### 51 IN DEMAND

My week inside the future of journalism  
*By Nicholas Spangler*

#### 3 OPENING SHOT

#### 4 EDITORIAL

The national conversation needs help

#### 6 LETTERS

#### 9 EDITOR'S NOTE

#### 10 CURRENTS

#### 15 DARTS & LAURELS

*By Lauren Kirchner*

## Reports

#### 16 LEARNING CURVE

Slideshows are the scourge, and the savior, of online journalism  
*By Chadwick Matlin*

#### 19 APPRECIATION

The Tab key, once the writer's policeman, is now his tour guide  
*By Karen Stabiner*

#### 21 TRANSPARENCY WATCH

Tech companies are the new frontier in disclosing conflicts  
*By Emily Brill*

#### 23 LEARNING CURVE

We're drowning in data, but most journalists don't know how to use them  
*By Janet Paskin*

#### 26 THE AMERICAN NEWSROOM

*Photograph by Sean Hemmerle*

## Ideas + Reviews

#### 54 SECOND READ

*Bill Marx on H.L. Mencken's unexpurgated Prejudices and what our own anemic critical culture could learn from a master*

#### 60 REVIEW

*Travels in Siberia*  
*By Ian Frazier*  
*Reviewed by Ted Conover*

#### 62 REVIEW

*We Were There: An Eyewitness History of the Twentieth Century*  
*Edited by Robert Fox*  
*Reviewed by Robert L. O'Connell*

#### 65 BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

*By James Boylan*

#### 66 REVIEW

*A Rope and a Prayer: A Kidnapping From Two Sides*  
*By David Rohde and Kristen Mulvihill*  
*Reviewed by Julia M. Klein*

#### 68 REVIEW

*Blur*  
*By Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel*  
*Reviewed by Carolyn Kellogg*

#### 71 THE RESEARCH REPORT

*By Michael Schudson and Julia Sonnevend*

#### 72 THE LOWER CASE



# THE ROSALYNN CARTER FELLOWSHIPS

## for Mental Health Journalism

THE  
CARTER CENTER



*"Informed journalists can have a significant impact on public understanding of mental health issues, as they shape debate and trends with the words and pictures they convey."*

— Rosalynn Carter

The Carter Center in Atlanta, Ga., announces six one-year journalism fellowships of \$10,000 each. Designed to enhance public understanding of mental health issues and combat stigma and discrimination against people with mental illnesses, the fellowships begin in September 2011. Fellows will not be required to leave their current employment.

The application deadline is April 18, 2011.  
To apply, e-mail:

Rebecca G. Palant, M.S.  
The Carter Center, Mental Health Program  
ccmhp@emory.edu  
[www.cartercenter.org/health/mental\\_health/fellowships/index.html](http://www.cartercenter.org/health/mental_health/fellowships/index.html)

For more information, see [www.cartercenter.org](http://www.cartercenter.org)



**CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY**  
WILKINSON COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

August 2011

Department of English

### TENURE-TRACK, ASSISTANT OR ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR

Creative Nonfiction/Journalism Position

Chapman University seeks applications for a faculty position in the English Department of Wilkinson College of Humanities and Social Sciences. Chapman University, located in the heart of Orange County, California, offers traditional undergraduate programs in the arts and sciences and select pre-professional and graduate programs. Ranked in the top tier of western universities by *U.S. News and World Report*, Chapman has gained national recognition with its commitment to excellence through research and innovative teaching. More information about the English Department is available at [www.chapman.edu/wilkinson/english](http://www.chapman.edu/wilkinson/english).

The English Department seeks a Creative Nonfiction Writer/Journalist at the Assistant or Associate Professor to teach at the graduate and undergraduate levels. The English Department is home to MFA, MA, and MFA/MA programs and to a BFA in creative writing and a BA in journalism and in literature. Candidates should have MFA or PhD in creative writing or MA or MS in journalism, teaching experience, and publication in nonfiction. Significant publication in national venues or a book is desired, but emerging writers/journalists with demonstrated potential will be considered. We're especially interested in candidates with potential in creative writing, journalism, long-form narrative, digital media, editing/publishing (print, online, or both), or interdisciplinary work. Ability to support student literary journal, student newspaper, student magazine, or other existing and future projects is desired. Competitive salary, and expectation of and support for continued publication.

Applicants should send a letter, CV, and writing sample of 10-25 pages by November 20 to:

Dr. Patrick Fuery, Chair, Department of English  
Chapman University, One University Drive, Orange, CA 92866

Chapman University is an Equal Opportunity Employer, committed to providing career opportunities for all people, without regard to race, color, religion, gender, age, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, or veteran status. Chapman University requires background checks for all new employees.

## COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

Published by the Columbia University  
Graduate School of Journalism

DEAN Nicholas Lemann

CHAIRMAN Victor Navasky

VICE CHAIRMAN Peter Osnos

EXECUTIVE EDITOR Mike Hoyt

MANAGING EDITOR/PRINT Brent Cunningham

MANAGING EDITOR/WEB Justin Peters

ASSOCIATE EDITOR/COPY MANAGER Tom O'Neill

EDITOR AT LARGE James Marcus

STAFF WRITERS Liz Cox Barrett,  
Curtis Brainard (Science),  
Clint Hendler

THE AUDIT Dean Starkman (Kingsford Capital  
Fellow), Ryan Chittum, Holly Yeager

ASSISTANT EDITORS Lauren Kirchner,  
Joel Meares

WEST COAST EDITOR Tom Goldstein

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS James Boylan,  
Julia M. Klein, Charles Lewis,  
Trudy Lieberman, Robert Love, Judith Matloff,  
Michael Massing, Douglas McCollam,  
Alissa Quart, Cristine Russell, Michael Shapiro,  
Scott Sherman

INTERNS Dylan DePice, Dino Grandoni,  
Michael Madden, Sarah Ngu

PUBLISHER Cathryn Cronin Cranston

DEPUTY PUBLISHER Dennis Giza

ADVERTISING DIRECTOR Louisa Kearney

BOOK ADVERTISING Allston-Cherry, Ltd.:  
Perry Janoski

DESIGN Point Five, NY:

Alissa Levin, Benjamin Levine, Nathan Eames

WEB SITE DEVELOPMENT Michael Murphy

CONTACT US Columbia Journalism Review

Journalism Building, 2950 Broadway  
Columbia University, New York, NY 10027

EDITORIAL 212-854-1881

E-MAIL [cjr@columbia.edu](mailto:cjr@columbia.edu)

ADVERTISING 516-883-2828

BOOK ADVERTISING 212-665-9885

BUSINESS 212-854-2718

SUBSCRIBE [www.cjr.org/subscriptions](http://www.cjr.org/subscriptions)

888-425-7782, or mail \$27.95 for one year,  
\$41.95 for two years to: CJR, P.O. Box 422492,  
Palm Coast, FL 32142-8974

**cjr.org**

Columbia Journalism Review (USPS 0804-780)  
(ISSN 0010-194X) is published bimonthly. Vol. XLIX, No. 4  
November/December 2010. Copyright © 2010 Columbia  
University. Subscription rates: one year \$27.95; two years  
\$41.95. Periodical postage paid at NY, NY, and at additional  
mailing office. POSTMASTER: send form 3579 to Columbia  
Journalism Review, P.O. Box 422492, Palm Coast, FL 32142.

# Opening Shot



**T**he midterm election season produced stories that tested journalism's ability to do what it must during political campaigns: sort fact from fiction and follow the money. The Tea Party confronted reporters with the messy reality of a grassroots movement; the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision opened the floodgates on anonymous political attack ads; the immigration story and the fitful economic recovery were ripe for demagoguery and distortion. Such stories challenged the role of fact-based information in the national conversation. How can we have an honest debate when a Senate candidate can claim that Sharia law has taken hold in American cities—and can remain a viable candidate? Or when politicians can assert that the stimulus did “nothing” to ease the recession? People who value intellectual honesty need to demand it—of their elected officials and their media. Some important steps in that direction are found in Steve Coll's open letter to the FCC, on page 28, in which he outlines an overhaul of America's decrepit information infrastructure. And our editorial comes at the problem from another angle, urging journalism to stand up and help “rebuild the forum that makes democracy work.” **CJR**

AP PHOTO / CHARLES DHARAPAK

---

**Q&A** President Obama during a discussion with neighborhood families in the backyard of the Clubb family in Des Moines, Iowa, September 29, 2010



## Escape the Silos

*How the press can help rebuild the American conversation*

In his wonderful book, *The Earl of Louisiana*, A. J. Liebling takes many a detour on his way to explaining that state, and in one of them he talks food. Specifically, he asks why food is so great in New Orleans and so bad sixty miles or so to the north. More specifically, he discusses PoBoys. ¶ Liebling and a companion stop at a joint north of New Orleans that promises “Shrimp, BarBQue, PoBoy” but delivers heartbreak: “The BarBQue was out, the shrimps

stiff with inedible batter, the coffee desperate.” As for the PoBoy, the traditional fried meat or seafood submarine, Liebling reaches a sad conclusion: “A PoBoy at Mumfrey’s in New Orleans is a portable banquet. In the South proper, it is a crippling blow to the intestine.” He goes on to discuss the many varied influences that make New Orleans such a delicious cultural gumbo.

What’s true about food is true of ideas: they get better when they’re adjacent in the pan. Ideas—particularly political ideas—are meant to be shared, to redefine themselves over the blue flame of discussion. Consumed in isolation they taste bland. Kept too long they get rancid. That’s a problem in America, where we increasingly live in separate information silos. In uncertain times the tribes gather close. People don’t talk to outsiders.

Media trends aren’t helping the situation. There is simple shrinkage, for starters. The *Chicago Tribune* used to cover the

Midwest; now it covers Chicago, barely. And ideological fracturing: Fox News and MSNBC, as everyone knows, profit by preaching to their respective choirs. It’s not the end of the world—the objective approach isn’t the only one that has value. Still, a massive retreat into ideological niches is hardly restricted to cable TV, and it doesn’t help the nation address its challenges.

The battered mainstream press has a mission here that can frame its work and maybe even energize it: helping to rebuild the democratic conversation. The key is not some namby-pamby civic sewing circle. Rather, the press should work toward the kind of earned authority that provides some common factual ground. Some suggestions:

- Ignore the bias bullies. If you are intellectually honest in your reporting and in story choices, stop cringing every time somebody says you are not.
- Stand up for facts. When Michele Bachmann insists that a million people came to Glenn Beck’s D.C. march, she’s no different from Louis Farrakhan, who insisted in 1995 that his Million Man March was just that. It wasn’t. But with the exception of CBS News, most media went he said/she said on Beck.
- Stop groveling. *The Portland Press Herald* took heat from readers for publishing an end-of-Ramadan feature on an auspicious date: 9/11. But there is a way to say, “We should have had more 9/11 coverage” without apologizing for a story about a legitimate segment of the readership.
- Do what you do best—deep reporting backed by institutional processes.

David Carr recently described the impact of his first online scooplet like this: “Boom.” He compared that to the impact of an October investigative piece he wrote in *The New York Times*: “Boom. Boom. Boom.” The difference? “There were many versions” of the article that finally ran in the *Times*, “lots of feedback from near and far, fact-checking, copy-checking and double-checking, all part of the practical effort to publish something as accurate as possible in a defined space.” All of that comes through to readers. Of course the *Times* brand didn’t hurt, but that is the point. There are, in scale, journalistic brands all over America that still have clout.

Civic discourse won’t be rapidly repaired in the wake of an angry election like the one that just ended any more than PoBoys will become an art form in Arkansas. But the press can best help rebuild the forum that makes democracy work by being its best self. **CJR**

**Journalists,**

**We pay you to study science at MIT and Harvard.**

**Revitalize** your career!



**Months to spend**

taking courses at Harvard & MIT..... **9**

**Stipend** (in U.S. dollars)..... **\$65,000**

**Opportunities** like this in a lifetime..... **1**

**Apply by March 1, 2011**



For more information and application forms: [mit.edu/knight-science](http://mit.edu/knight-science)

Follow us on Twitter: [KSJatMIT](https://twitter.com/KSJatMIT)

Email: [Knight-info@mit.edu](mailto:Knight-info@mit.edu)

Phone: **617-253-3442**

**Hamster Food for Thought**

Great article (“Hamster Wheel” by Dean Starkman, CJR, September/October). “The Wheel” entirely devalues the profession of journalism. It allows business-siders to support their misconceived “anyone can write” agenda that allows them to let go of staffers, churn out fluff pieces, or simply rewrite press releases or reports.

Perhaps backlash has offered the opportunity to reinvigorate the idea of professional journalists and editors as “curators” of the news. Today’s sites have become places where Rembrandts hang alongside Keans, the rare Night Watch surrounded by lots of paintings of kids with big eyes. Could there be room for allowing news reporters and editors to make choices, investigate, and analyze? And do it in a new model? Please!

Stuart Feil  
New York, NY

A very important piece by Dean Starkman. The growing ability of PR folks to control the news agenda is alarming. Their ability to create and parcel out mini-scoops over the course of a news cycle gives them huge leverage. They will do whatever reporters let them do.

Bill Bulkeley  
Boston, MA

Brilliant piece. Unfortunately, I had to stop in the middle of reading it yesterday morning to file three blog posts. I finally got back to it at 1 am this morning. Big wheels keep on turnin’....

Dan Tynan  
Wilmington, NC

Regarding your story, there’s a simple way to get off that hamster wheel: Ditch your already obsolete websites.

The newspaper business is suffering from a thought virus that has virtually everyone believing that their particular website will someday be monetized.



## Today’s newspaper sites are the equivalent of rusting Impalas cruising down a highway of despair.

They are the equivalent of rusting 1974 Impalas cruising down a highway of despair with their drivers perfectly oblivious to how old fashioned and ineffective they’ve become in the era of Facebook, social networking, and cookie-cutter websites beyond count.

Our alternative newsweekly, *Northern Express Weekly*, takes an online tack that mimics what has proven successful during the three-hundred-year history of the newspaper. We simply put the entire paper online as a “virtual” publication.

Result: our advertisers get something out of our online effort with “free” Internet ads for supporting the real world paper. And our readers get to see the ads that are missing on the typical newspaper website.

The virtual newspaper costs next to nothing to produce and works on the iPad. By the way, revenues at *Northern*

*Express Weekly* are up 11 percent over 2009.

Robert Downes  
Managing editor  
Northern Express Weekly  
Traverse City, MI

**Pillar to Post**

Re: “A Rocket’s Trajectory: Marcus Brauchli at *The Washington Post*” by Scott Sherman (CJR, September/October). It’s clear that Brauchli has made more than his share of missteps, some major; few of his friends would even argue otherwise. But the broader question that the article begs is, What would success look like? It’s a paper that has lost at least a quarter of its staff, was saddled with a split print/online newsroom (in two locations), faced with plunging revenues and other challenges.

Leonard Downie Jr, to his credit, managed the journalism at the *Post* exceptionally well over the years of declining resources; he may well have been the best at it among U.S. editors. But it didn’t really put the paper on any firmer financial footing, and Brauchli’s job now is to try and find some sustainable business with fewer and fewer resources.

That’s not to say he’s doing a good job; only that this is pretty untrod ground for everyone. There are few U.S. papers that could stand a comparison with their ten- or twenty-year-ago selves.

Reg Chua  
Hong Kong

Sherman’s “A Rocket’s Trajectory” was well constructed and right on point. It captured the difficulty Brauchli has encountered assuming his position at a time of stress and flux. It is honest about Brauchli’s failures and clear about his successes. However, there is one issue I wish Sherman had included in the piece: Declining coverage of the D.C. region.

When I moved from Manhattan to Charlottesville, Virginia, in the summer of 2007, the first thing I did was

call *The Washington Post* to subscribe to home delivery. I remembered fondly the weekend visits I had made to Washington in the 1980s and 1990s, when my group of Texas-raised journalist friends and I would sit around and devour every section of the *Sunday Post*, lamenting that our local papers from Texas could not or would not cover their regions so lyrically and comprehensively. We would marvel at the resources the *Post* put into local coverage.

My fond memories of the old *Post* would only haunt me as I established myself as an active citizen of Virginia. By the fall of 2009, I had cancelled my *Post* subscription. The *Post* was no lon-

ger a serious newspaper, willing to make sense of its readers' world for them. By then, the *Post* had closed all its bureaus in the U.S. And the newsholes devoted to Virginia and Maryland were so small as to be largely irrelevant. So the states that taxed the two largest segments of *Post* readers would no longer be of interest to the *Post* newsroom. The *Post* would still devote massive resources to packages, series, and stories that might win big prizes. But covering the actual news about the country and region would be a luxury the *Post* could not afford.

The incentive systems of daily newspapers has been askew for years. Under current conditions, it's even more absurd.

## NOTES FROM OUR ONLINE READERS

IN CJR'S SEPTEMBER 28 NEWS MEETING, "WOULDA COULDA SHOULDA," WE asked our readers, Have you made any pivotal career mistakes and, if so, where have they led you?

A long time ago, I was an intern at the *Columbia Journalism Review*. It was like being a bat-boy for the Yanks... working with writers like Wren Weschler from *The New Yorker*. Just answering the phone was a thrill—Fred Friendly is on the line. That first paycheck from CJR for writing an article. Incredulous that people actually get paid for writing. Then with the encouragement of an associate editor at CJR, I applied to the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University and somehow got accepted.

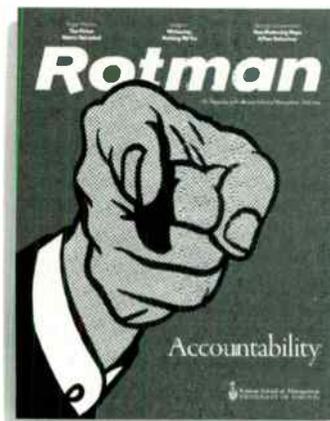
I had that nagging sense I was no journalist. I could barely type five words a minute; I often jumbled things up; the braces on my teeth whistled when I said words with an "s." For some reason I declined my acceptance and moved up to Boston to play drums in a rock band with my brother. I figured I could get a job at a Boston daily and play in the clubs at night. How wrong I was! I ended up working odd jobs here and there.

How many young aspiring journalists would have jumped at that acceptance letter? I often thought, one-time working as a carpenter, stepping on a nail. Where would life have taken me if I had gotten my masters in journalism?

Ten years later, I got a job as an associate editor at a trade magazine then got promoted to editor. Then after that, my band-mate brother suggested we launch a magazine together. We lasted about five years before the financial crisis shut us down. That was two years ago. I think John Lennon said it best, "Life is what happens while you're busy making other plans." —Dan Sheridan

IN HIS OCTOBER 6 PIECE, "NOT WATCHING SACRAMENTO," CJR'S JOEL MEARES took a look at the California capital's shuttered news bureaus and dwindling press corps to assess what that means for coverage of the nation's largest state government.

Yes, the Sacramento press corps has shrunk badly, but having watched it closely as the *Bee's* editorial page editor from 1978 on, I'm not sure it was ever as searching as the fond reminiscences suggest. Big stories were missed—among them the booby traps in the state's quasi-energy-deregulation bill that brought on the electricity crisis of 2001–2. More important, serious TV coverage of Sacramento all but vanished in the late 1980s and returned only briefly to chase Schwarzenegger in the year or two after he was elected. And only rarely, given the size and complexity of the state, did the fundamental governmental problems of the state get serious coverage. Everybody knew when the budget was late, but hardly anyone knew why, or what Sacramento's politics meant in terms of the programs and policies that the political battles were about. —Peter Schrag



**"Rotman magazine tackles real ideas with a verve and style that I have not encountered anywhere else."**

—Peter Day  
BBC Radio Presenter,  
"In Business" and "Global Business"

Try a risk-free issue:  
[rotman.utoronto.ca/must-read](http://rotman.utoronto.ca/must-read)

## Rotman School Big Ideas Experts Series

November 16, London UK  
18h00-21h00: discussion, cocktails

Adi Ignatius  
Editor in Chief,  
*Harvard Business Review*

Roger Martin  
Dean, Rotman School;  
Director, Research in Motion,  
Skoll Foundation, Thomson Reuters

Topic:  
Customer-Driven Capitalism:  
The New Paradigm

£25.00 per person

To Register:  
[rotman.utoronto.ca/events](http://rotman.utoronto.ca/events)

**Rotman**  
a new way to think



WELCOMES SUBMISSIONS FOR 2010.

The awards, given by Long Island University for excellence in journalism, are primarily for investigative work. They cover news stories in print and online and photographs and radio and television broadcasts. Entries must include two original clips or recordings (with two copies of printed text plus URLs for digital submissions). They should come with an explanatory letter and be postmarked no later than January 5, 2011.

The address for submission is:

John Darnton, Curator  
The George Polk Awards  
Long Island University  
The Brooklyn Campus  
1 University Plaza  
Brooklyn, NY 11201-5372

The feedback mechanisms at work have created a vicious cycle by which readers care less about the brands that deliver news as those firms care less about news. So revenue decreases, so papers cut back on news, so readers flee.

The *Post* will never be great again until it re-opens bureaus across the country and decides to cover, rather than ignore, Maryland and Virginia.

*Siva Vaidhyanathan*  
Charlottesville, VA

### Who Is Out There?

Lucas Graves's "Traffic Jam: We'll never agree about online audience size" (CJR, September/October) makes me think that some open cookie standard would help. For one thing, the cookie would be regulated, which would be good for users. But it could be a source of clout for the social networks as well. A news viewer may access the same site from several computers, but one thing those computers have in common is the cookie they get from Twitter or Facebook or Google.

*Jonathon@nationalheadquarters.org*  
North America

As Graves's article implies, Nielsen's monopoly over television ratings has raised questions for years about how numbers are generated, tracked, manipulated, and published. I've spent more than a few nights looking at TV ratings, week-by-week, year-over-year, and my view is such that complacency with a crooked system is just as bad as being in promotion of said system. Set-top-box data? Some people have legitimate concerns about it, but it's a shame others refuse it just because the new technology would force market researchers to be a little better at their job.

*Aaron B.*  
Champaign, IL

Graves writes: "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."

Since we're in the age of digital TV, this makes little sense to me. If the cable and satellite TV companies got together, they could tally an actual count of viewers. They could also indicate how many people watch commercials (not many),

which is probably why they don't report this stuff. I imagine they are doing this kind of research anyway—for their own internal optimization purposes. But the idea that Nielsen is the only option out there seems wrong to me. There are plenty of ways to "detect," either by tallying actual numbers or using a statistically significant sample size. It just seems that there's no interest in doing it—at least not for public consumption.

*Michael Schreiber*  
Montclair, NJ

### The New Video Storytellers

While Jill Drew addresses many aspects of, and despairs over, the state of online video journalism ("See It Now," CJR, September/October), she and CJR may have overlooked the real challenges in recent years to the quality of video journalism produced by local television stations and the broadcast/cable networks.

The growing appetite for instant information on the web has driven down viewership for television news. The state of the economy and the desire to cut costs have led many news managers, especially at the local level, to require reporters to shoot and edit their own news video as well as write and voice the stories they cover. An enormous number of TV news photographers have lost their jobs as a result. While smaller cameras and simpler software make the job somewhat easier for local VJs (Video Journalists) or MMJs (Multimedia Journalists) working alone, the impact of and the adjustment to the loss of the TV news photographers in the industry is significantly changing the content of local news, as well as the quality of video storytelling. Drew's subhed—"Video journalism is dying. Long live video journalism"—also applies to the upheavals on the broadcast side.

However, quality newsvideo can be found on broadcast and cable-TV websites. While many may be "repurposed for the Web," there are stories of value, interest, and high quality being produced everyday for the digital age. This is, in part, because a significant number of those TV photographers whose jobs were threatened and were always true believers in video storytelling saw their world changing and

**DART**  
FOR EXCELLENCE IN  
**AWARDS**  
COVERAGE OF TRAUMA  
**APPLY NOW**  
DEADLINE: JAN. 25, 2011  
DARTCENTER.ORG

became MMJs themselves. Broadcast TV photographers are helping to build the foundation of online video news worth watching.

Bill Goetz

News photographer. KVAL-TV

Eugene, OR

### Corrections

In a piece about Russia Today in our September/October issue, we misidentified Sophie Shevardnadze as the daughter of Georgia's second president. She is his granddaughter. We also wrote that RT had "aired" ads that conflated Barack Obama with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The ads were posted on billboards, not broadcast. And in our September/October Lower Case, we misspelled Corval-

lis in *Corvallis Gazette-Times*. We regret the errors. CJR

MAJOR FUNDERS for CJR and CJR.org in recent years include the Arca Foundation, The Atlantic Philanthropies, Neil Barsky, The Brunswick Group, The Cabot Family Trust, Carnegie Corporation, The Challenge Fund for Journalism, Citigroup, Nathan Cummings Foundation, The Ford Foundation, Goldman Sachs, William and Mary Greve Foundation, Kingsford Capital Management, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Joan Konner, David and Esther Laventhol, William Lilley III, Peter Lowy, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Open Society Institute, James H. Ottaway Jr., Park Foundation, Peter G. Peterson Foundation, Charles H. Revson Foundation, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Rockefeller Family Fund, Sunlight Foundation, TIAA-CREF, M & T Weiner Foundation, Winokur Family Foundation, and our readers.

### EDITOR'S NOTE

IN THE FUTURE, I AM ASKING EVERYONE ON CJR'S STAFF TO HIDE THEIR LIGHT under a bushel. Otherwise, people may notice their excellence, and—poof—they're gone. For example:

- Somebody at *Harper's Magazine* noticed that James Marcus, our editor at large, has been producing a classy and illuminating Ideas & Reviews section of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, and hired him away as that magazine's deputy editor. James is fantastic, and *Harper's* will soon know how fortunate it is.

- Somebody at Columbia University Press noticed that Dean Starkman runs our lively and influential business desk, *The Audit*, at CJR.org, while, with his other hand, he writes first-rate cover stories for the magazine (including "Hamster Wheel," the September/October cover). In "Power Problem," the May/June 2009 cover, Starkman critiqued the performance of the elite business press before the great crash. That piece has won more prizes than Starkman can carry. Now he'll expand its thesis into a book, and place that dismal period into the context of journalism history. Fortunately, we are only losing half of Dean; he will continue to run *The Audit* in the a.m., with his excellent deputy editor, Ryan Chittum.

- Somebody at Simon & Schuster found out that Brent Cunningham, our managing editor/print, is also our managing editor/food, and a thoughtful and provocative writer, as is his wife, Jane Black, until recently a food writer for *The Washington Post*. The two got married and got a book contract, in that order. They will research how a town in Brent's native West Virginia is trying to change the way it eats, and what that effort says about the good-food revolution's ability to overcome barriers of class, culture, and convenience. Brent will take an eight-month leave from CJR.

Damn.

But, seriously, congratulations to all.

Meanwhile I am delighted to tell you that Jill Drew will fill in for Cunningham during his absence. On that score, CJR couldn't be luckier. Drew is a former business editor and foreign correspondent for *The Washington Post*, and a 2009/2010 CJR Encore Fellow. Among her articles for CJR as a fellow were a profile of NPR's leader, Vivian Schiller ("NPR Amps Up," March/April); an assessment of prospects for the new nonprofit investigative outlets ("The New Investigators," May/June); and an exploration of the future of news video ("See It Now," September/October). She is passionate about serious journalism and its search for a future, as are we, and we're delighted she is joining us in a new capacity.

—Mike Hoyt

# FREE TRAINING



"This course really revolutionized my reporting!"

—Jaclyn Trop, The Detroit News

## FREE WEBINARS + WORKSHOPS

- Nov. 16: Online  
**Covering the Green Economy - The Future of Energy**
- Dec. 1-2: Online  
**Writing Business News for the Web**, with Pulitzer winner Jacqui Banaszynski
- Jan. 31: Philadelphia, and April 7: Dallas  
**Mining the Census for Local Business Stories**, with USA Today database editor Paul Overberg
- Feb. 8-10: Online  
**Using Social Media to Cover Business Better**
- Feb. 23: Raleigh, N.C.  
**Investigating Private Companies and Nonprofits**
- March 4: Los Angeles, and April 19, Online  
**Covering the Green Economy**

Sign up at

**BUSINESSJOURNALISM.ORG**

Where you'll find

News | Free training | Story ideas  
Help with stories | Job listings  
Daily tips | Self-guided training



Donald W. Reynolds  
**National Center for Business Journalism**

TWITTER: @BIZJOURNALISM  
FACEBOOK: BIZJOURNALISM

# Currents



## The Future of Journalism?

*This fall, the Big Ten and the Southeastern conferences offered college football fans more original content than ever, posting preview stories, in-game quarterly recaps, and immediate post-game analysis online—and all of it was created by a computer. The company behind the effort, Narrative Science, was born out of collaboration between the Medill School of Journalism and the McCormick School of Engineering and Applied Science at Northwestern University, and readers apparently never noticed the absence of a human scribe. Janet Paskin asked Kristian Hammond, a professor of computer science at Northwestern and the chief technology officer of Narrative Science, how a computer program generates a sports story and what that means*

*for the future of journalism. A longer version of their conversation is at [www.cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/the\\_future\\_of\\_journalism.php](http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/the_future_of_journalism.php).*

### **What inspired this program?**

We set out to build something that could write a genuine story based on data. There's a tradition of using census data, crime data, financial statements to create stories. Sports happened to be first.

### **I'm not sure sports writers are very happy about that. Doesn't it imply that game stories are formulaic?**

If this were formulaic, it'd be easy. We have to make everything that's implicit in a writer's skill set explicit to

a machine. The balance of "what happened" with what makes what happened interesting, and the figuring of the priorities, the structure of the narrative—all those things participate in the system of building a story. It's complex, and we love that.

### **What data does the program need to create a game story?**

The same data a reporter would use to write a recap if he weren't at the game: box score, play-by-play, player stats, player trends, team statistics. We use a range of statistics and draw in the things that end up being interesting. If a player is close to breaking a record, or a team record, we can notice those things and articulate them.

### **How do you go from there to a narrative?**

You have to characterize the structure of the game. We know that the facts that are in the story are in the data, so how do we pull out the interesting facts? First, we characterized the plays: Did it change the score? Did it set up a play that changed the score or who was winning? Then we created our idea of an "angle": Was this a surprise victory? Was this a back-and-forth? We then apply the angles and generate a story.

### **Could this cost people jobs?**

Our goal is to generate stories in places where publishing organizations simply don't have the manpower to write these stories. Local newspapers are fighting for

**'Nationally, there's no contest now. We're more than twice as big as The New York Times. They're not a serious competitor.'**

—Wall Street Journal editor Robert Thomson on the paper's expanded weekend edition and its number-one target

survival. If we can provide highly localized content inexpensively, they can fill two more pages and sell ads. With that extra money, they can hire someone to write the stories we can't touch.

#### **Was that intuitive to your colleagues at Medill?**

It was not their first response. But they're very forward-looking. They understand that technology is not the answer, but it's going to be part of the solution.

#### **What's next, after sports?**

Finance is a wonderful area where there's a tremendous amount of data. In financial reporting, there aren't that many companies where reporters are really paying close attention. We can pay attention to all of them.

## Lost Links

I THOUGHT I WAS DOING the responsible thing buying [Christinabellantoni.com](http://Christinabellantoni.com), having a friend build it out with snazzy graphics, and linking to my work. All the cool kids are doing it, their personal sites becoming the perfect one-liner for a cover letter. But when a tech snafu gobbled the summaries and links to my clips, I learned that linking to something on the Internet isn't enough.

My former employer no longer hosted videos I'd spent hours editing; instead of playing, they gave error messages. It was almost as if blog items tracking my 2008 presidential campaign travel

through twenty-six states and Europe never existed.

As a young journalist who spent hours photocopying my newspaper clippings, I was terrified of sending out the last copy, losing the printed word forever. In the digital world there's a new fear: What if the link goes dead?

"It's almost impossible finding some of my more memorable pieces," says M. E. Sprenghelmeyer, a former reporter for the defunct *Rocky Mountain News*. Paper is the only medium he trusts for preservation since online archives can hide behind paywalls, disappear entirely, or be hard to find with a Google search. Indeed, it took some creative searching for me to track down Sprenghelmeyer's favorite, a hilarious account of how he purchased Jack Abramoff's old suits to wear to a White House party.

Even without paywalls or glitches, online archives are unreliable. For instance, a re-design of [WashingtonTimes.com](http://WashingtonTimes.com), the website of my former employer, preserved every story but deleted all the bylines, rendering searches nearly impossible. And not long after I left the *Times*, programmers deleted my 2008 presidential campaign blog from the site—without warning. (They revived the archive, but if the paper folds, those posts are gone.)

All this raises the question: Should you keep every word you've ever written?

My journalist-husband complains that I save everything, and maybe preserving all my online work will turn me into a digital packrat. I counter that, sure, not everything on my blog was a masterpiece, but I constantly refer to it to remember where it was that Obama belted out Aretha Franklin or check the name of an Obama field organizer.

I set out to learn the best practices for saving work, but instead gave beleaguered reporters one more thing to worry about. "I assumed they would be on LexisNexis forever," one newspaper reporter told me. (Nexis doesn't include blogs.) Another relies en-



tirely on his Twitter archive to track down old stories.

I found just one person with a strategy. Ryan J. Reilly, my former colleague at Talking Points Memo, keeps a tidy archive. He took time to export his posts from their original WordPress blogging platform into a data file, then upload them to his personal site, also run

## HARD NUMBERS

**47** percent of Internet users ages fifty to sixty-four used social networking between April 2009 and May 2010—up from 25 percent the year before

**100** percent growth in the same period for Internet users over sixty-five using social networking

**35** percent of adults who own cell phones with apps; only two-thirds use them and only 13 percent of adult cell-phone users paid for an app

**52** percent of adults who downloaded apps in the thirty days before a 2009 Nielson apps playbook survey and used them for news or weather

**60** percent of adults who used apps in the same period for games; 51 percent for maps and navigation

**1,000** the number of people Glenn Beck joked the media would report attended his "Restoring Honor" rally in August

**500,000** the minimum number of people Beck eventually decided had attended the rally

**87,000** people, with a margin of error of 9,000, attended the rally, according to CBS and AirPhotosLive.com's calculations

**70** minutes a day spent with the news by the average American (thirteen of those minutes are spent online), an increase of three minutes from the 2006-08 average

**17** percent of Americans said they got no news of any kind the day before they were called for the survey

Sources: The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Pew Internet & American Life Project, Fox News Channel, CBS News

by WordPress. He tells me: "I learned the hard way." (A site where he once worked got a virus, erasing years' worth of articles from the database.)

This method is not fail-proof—photos don't always convert properly, and my problems with *Christinabelantoni.com* were thanks to a bot eating my WordPress database. But if you lose the site, you can restore it with the original export file.

Here's my advice: most of us tweet or e-mail our best work to colleagues—add archiving to your routine. Toss the headline, link, and text of the piece into an e-mail. Attach any raw image or video. Send it to yourself. Your inbox is searchable, and if you lose the live link someday, you'll be able to recreate it.

Do it now. Journalists are procrastinators motivated by deadlines or disaster. If that disaster is your clips disappearing, it will be too late.

—Christina Bellantoni

## Drop Out?

THE UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO at Boulder kicked up a cloud of dust when it announced in August that

it had formed a committee to consider the creation of a "new interdisciplinary academic program of information, communication and technology."

The kicker? It had formed another committee to explore the "discontinuance" of its journalism school.

J-schools around the country are overhauling their curriculums to prepare students for a changing industry. But the suggestion that a journalism school might need to be sacrificed in that effort led to consternation.

The University of Colorado may still spare the school. The discontinuance committee will deliver a report to the provost in early November. The chancellor will then make a recommendation about the fate of the journalism school, as well as the creation of another school, in early 2011. The ultimate decision will be left to the Board of Regents.

The squabbling, though, began immediately. Two days after the university's announcement, journalism school dean Paul Voakes told Denver-based *Westword* that "the first wave of headlines

was somewhere in the range of premature to inaccurate." In fact, most articles explained that closing the school is not a foregone conclusion and quoted university officials insisting that the intent of the "discontinue" process is to put the school in the vanguard of media education. Many commentators pushed back against these rosy assurances, however.

In an *Inside Higher Education* column, Michael Bugeja, director of the Greenlee School of Journalism at Iowa State University, wrote that "perhaps unintentionally, Voakes is harming otherwise thriving journalism programs by claiming his school is on the cutting edge instead of the chopping block."

Tim McGuire, the Frank Russell Chair for the Business of Journalism at Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, wrote on his blog: "Voakes can downplay what's happening all he wants, but I not-so-boldly predict that at the end of the committee process mandated by the chancellor there will not be anything most

of us would recognize as a journalism department."

When the exploratory committee looking into the creation of a new school held an open forum in late October to discuss options for a future program, it faced a room full of unhappy J-school faculty and students, the *Daily Camera* in Boulder reported. Committee chairman Merrill Lessley told them that while the new initiative is still unclear, the program will not provide students with a traditional journalism education.

That statement is sure to upset those who think that placing journalism under the tent of "information, communication and technology" risks sacrificing values like accuracy, context, and clarity.

A university task force that outlined a broad vision for the new information school cited more than thirty "schools/colleges of computing/technology" that have been created nationwide. It included the University of California, Berkeley, but ignored the fact that that university has kept its highly esteemed Graduate School of Journalism intact.

"[D]oes innovation require blowing something up, as Colorado is apparently contemplating?" McGuire asked. It's a good question. In answering it, the committee should keep in mind that no matter the medium, deep reporting and clear writing will always be the soul of the best journalism. According to the *Daily Camera*, the university has discontinued seventeen degree programs since the late 1990s, but closing an entire school would be "unprecedented." It could also be tragic, if not handled carefully.

—Curtis Brainard

## LANGUAGE CORNER A MATTER OF TASTE

Write [LanguageCorner@cjr.org](mailto:LanguageCorner@cjr.org)

When a word takes on unwanted connotations, people seeking a replacement often settle on something close, thinking, perhaps, that the words are synonyms. Sometimes, though, the new word comes with unwanted connotations, too.

Take "gourmet." From a noun referring to a fine judge of wine, over the years it came to mean a connoisseur of good food and drink. Now, it's used more as an adjective for the food being enjoyed than for the person enjoying it. And once marketers began using "gourmet" to describe everything from fried snacks to cat food, many people cast about for an alternative and landed on "gourmand" to describe the food lover.

The only problem is many people (and dictionaries and usage guides) see the difference between a "gourmet" and a "gourmand" as the difference between someone who appreciates the delicate spices in a *coq au vin* and someone who crams down ten portions of it. Although "gourmand" has been used for at least three hundred years to mean "gourmet," its more frequent use means someone who loves good food too much.

So unless you are a glutton for punishment, you might steer clear of "gourmand" and come up with something less, um, filling. "Epicure" might work. Or "connoisseur." Or even good old American "food lover."

—Merrill Perlman

# Journalism is changing for good



"At a time when the news industry is under-going profound and disruptive change, the Knight program has been invaluable in helping media companies change their skills and thinking to prosper in the post-print world. The program combines practical knowledge and strategic thinking – tools and hope – for journalists."

John Yemma  
– Editor, *Christian Science Monitor*

**Knight  
Digital Media  
Center**

Dedicated to helping good journalists  
and good journalism succeed in the 21st Century

The Knight Digital Media Center – a partnership of the USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism and the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism – offers a spectrum of training programs from a multimedia skills boot camp for digital neophytes to transformational leadership training for top editors. These competitive fellowship programs are supported by funding from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

## **USC High-impact seminars and leadership conferences**

Journalists already working in multimedia environments learn the time-tested best practices that make them consistently effective and accurate. They explore new ways to tell complicated stories about critical issues with digital tools. Leadership conferences guide editors in the most efficient ways to transform their newsrooms for multiplatform, 24/7 publication.

## **UC Berkeley Multimedia reporting and convergence workshops**

An intense "hands-on" boot camp immerses highly skilled traditional journalists into an active digital newsroom environment to learn the newest tools and skills to report and create for multimedia platforms. Introduces reporters and editors to emerging technology and storytelling tools that are needed to reach and be interactive with digital audiences.

[www.KnightDigitalMediaCenter.org](http://www.KnightDigitalMediaCenter.org)

**Congratulations to the 2010 winner of the \$75,000**

# Grantham Prize

for Excellence in Reporting on the Environment

## **Alanna Mitchell**

for her book *Sea Sick: The Global Ocean in Crisis*  
published by McClelland & Stewart, Canada; The University of Chicago Press, U.S.

**and to the winners of \$5,000 Awards of Special Merit—**

**Dan Egan** of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel  
for Environmental Beat Reporting.

**Cleo Paskal** for her book, *Global Warring: How Environmental, Economic,  
and Political Crises Will Redraw the World Map*  
published by Key Porter Books, Canada; Palgrave MacMillan, U.S.

**Hedrick Smith Productions for PBS Frontline**  
**Hedrick Smith, Rick Young, Marc Shaffer, Peter Pearce,**  
**Penny Trams, Catherine Rentz, Fritz Kramer**  
for *Poisoned Waters*.

## **CALL FOR ENTRIES**

The Metcalf Institute for Marine & Environmental Reporting invites entries for the sixth annual \$75,000 Grantham Prize for Excellence in Reporting on the Environment from media in the U.S. and Canada.

Postmark Deadlines:  
Books, January 10, 2011  
All other entries, February 4, 2011

The Grantham Prize is administered by the Metcalf Institute for Marine & Environmental Reporting.

Details about the Prize and application requirements are available at

**[www.granthamprize.org](http://www.granthamprize.org)**

The Grantham Prize  
Metcalf Institute for  
Marine & Environmental Reporting  
University of Rhode Island  
Graduate School of Oceanography  
Narragansett, RI 02882  
[info@granthamprize.org](mailto:info@granthamprize.org)

# Metcalf

## **USC ANNENBERG SCHOOL FOR COMMUNICATION & JOURNALISM**

### CALL FOR NOMINATIONS

## **Selden Ring Award for Investigative Reporting**

Prize: \$35,000

The Selden Ring Award for Investigative Reporting underscores the critical importance of investigative journalism in today's society. The prize recognizes published investigative reporting that has brought results. Full-time or freelance reporters working for a general circulation United States newspaper, wire service, magazine or online publication are eligible for the award. Editors, publishers, educators, journalism organizations and others may make nominations.

For a nomination form, visit [annenbergschool.usc.edu/seldenring](http://annenbergschool.usc.edu/seldenring)  
Deadline: **February 1**

**Geneva Overholser, director, School of Journalism**  
Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism • University of Southern California  
3502 Watt Way • Los Angeles, California 90089-0281  
Email: [genevao@usc.edu](mailto:genevao@usc.edu) • Telephone: 213-740-3914

## LAUREL



In 2008, *L.A. Weekly* reporter Christine Pelisek learned that the Los Angeles Police Department had recently dedicated a secret task force to investigate the connection between several unsolved murders in the city from 2002 and 2007 and a number of other cold cases from the 1980s. When she inquired about it, the police confirmed to her that a serial killer was responsible for all the murders, and that, after a thirteen-year gap, he had returned.

Pelisek had at that point been scratching around the fringes of the story of these unsolved murders for two years, but the fact that the killer was back at work was new and startling information. The LAPD was resistant to Pelisek making the task force public, thinking that it would scare the killer away. She disagreed. “I thought it was a public safety issue,” Pelisek said, “and I thought that the public should know.”

Pelisek and her editor, Jill Stewart, dubbed the suspected killer “The Grim Sleeper” because of the thirteen-year-long gap in his crime spree, and Pelisek wrote a long cover story about him in August 2008. She railed against the city politicians and police department for their lack of urgency, of resources, and of communication with the community. It was explosive, and the resulting publicity turned into public pressure. Within days, the Los Angeles City Council pledged a \$500,000 reward for information that led to the killer’s capture. The LAPD finally reached out to the victims’ families, attended vigils, and met with church and community leaders. California Attorney General Jerry Brown gave the go-ahead for an unprecedented screening of the DNA database for California’s felons.

Pelisek followed up with several articles in the next two years, staying on the story with updates in the case and profiles of the killer’s victims. The DNA screenings eventually worked: a man arrested on a weapons charge was found to be a “familial match” to the alleged killer. The killer, the police would find, was his father. On July 7, 2010, Lonnie David Franklin Jr. was identified as The Grim Sleeper and arrested at his home in south Los Angeles.

A *Los Angeles Times* editorial following The Grim Sleeper’s arrest praised Pelisek’s work: “Christine Pelisek... forced the city to care about a group of victims who had been largely forgotten by all but their families and a few LAPD detectives.” For her dogged pursuit of The Grim Sleeper and her advocacy for his victims, we give her a **LAUREL**.

AT ANOTHER FREE WEEKLY, THE *LONG ISLAND PRESS*, STAFF writer Jaclyn Gallucci’s persistence and instincts turned a sim-

ple idea for a missing-persons story into a public service, one that similarly gave voice to long-forgotten murder victims.

Gallucci’s July 1 cover story, “Long Island’s Unidentified Murder Victims: Do You Know John Doe?” began with a stirring portrait of a scene at 6 a.m. on a pier on City Island in the Bronx. A ferry is taking a busload of New York state prisoners to bury the city’s unidentified dead in the potter’s field on tiny Hart Island:

Rikers Island inmates bury them in trenches, 150 per numbered concrete marker, two across, three deep. A handful of these victims were found on Long Island, and investigators say there is at least one person, somewhere, who knows who they are.

When she inquired about doing a story on a missing-persons case, the Nassau County coroner gave Gallucci his file of all of the unidentified bodies that he had come across since 1982. Because of improvements in forensic analysis, the list was small: eighteen remaining mysteries. Poring through the file, Gallucci’s notion of her story changed. She decided to focus on the murder victims, both as tribute to the nameless dead and an attempt to help identify them.

She profiled each of them, providing as much information as the authorities had been able to gather: age, gender, injuries, what they were wearing, where they were found, what they had in their pockets. There is “The Girl With the Peach Tattoo,” a woman who was found dismembered in a garbage bag in Hempstead Lake State Park thirteen years ago. And “The Man in the Median,” found on the Northern State Parkway at least twenty-six years after his death: only a skeleton, tattered clothes, and a gold watch remained.

Alongside the story of each cold case, the *Long Island Press* printed the photographs of the victims’ tattoos, their clothing, and their facial reconstruction illustrations—all in an effort to trigger a reader’s memory.

Gallucci didn’t stop when her story came out. She carried stacks of the issue with her and left them everywhere she went, even taking trips to Manhattan and upstate towns to distribute them there, hoping the Long Island cases she described could be connected to missing-persons cases elsewhere. She said she was haunted by the thought that these victims would remain nameless, and that their killers would get away with murder.

She’ll never know how many tips to police hotlines came in as a result of her story. But as Tony Evelina, an area director for the volunteer advocacy group The Doe Network, told Gallucci for her article, publicity is the key to identifying unnamed victims. “You’ve got to keep them in the spotlight constantly,” he said. “You can’t let people forget.” Gallucci earns her **LAUREL** for shining that light. **CJR**

## A Faustian Bargain

*Slideshows are the scourge, and the savior, of online journalism*

IN MAY 2009, THEBIGMONEY.COM WAS SHOUTING INTO THE VOID. SLATE'S BUSINESS site was eight months old, but it was still averaging only 50,000 page views a day, well below The Slate Group's goal. Staff members, of which I was one, were at a loss: Where do you find an extra 100,000 page views laying around?

But then, manna descended. The tech team had finally built a way for us to publish a slideshow. Until then, The Big Money didn't have the capability to run simple photo galleries that would earn a page view—and display a new ad—after every new click. Within days we ran our first slideshow, a visual essay about the history of credit-card design. Overnight, we found our 100,000 page views. Over the next few days, the slideshow made up 40 percent of our total traffic.

Slideshows quickly became an economic salve, and so they soon became an editorial priority. The agenda for weekly story meetings had a spot reserved to discuss upcoming slideshows. When that wasn't enough, more meetings were held specifically to generate new slideshow ideas. Freelancers were encouraged to pitch stories that could be turned into slideshows.

Sometimes we ran great slideshows that were thoughtful, serialized essays ("Dubai to All That: A gallery of the trophy assets and projects that sank Dubai's ship"). Other times we published something because we couldn't afford not to ("Madoff's Celebrity Marks: Where are they now?"). We still were only running one a week, but often that one slideshow earned an entire day's worth of traffic on its own. In order to publish all of our other content—less grabby and just as consequential—we had to run the slideshows.

(An unhappy coda: even slideshows weren't enough. The Slate Group's general manager, Jacob Weisberg, decided to shutter The Big Money in July.)

We weren't alone. Across the web, slideshows have become a shortcut to better traffic numbers; a shortcut that sites are now going out of their way to take. And increasingly they're published because of the medium, not the message. The Huffington Post's eleven-page presentation, "Simona Halep Breast Reduction Surgery PHOTOS: Tennis Star Back in Action" is only Exhibit A. *New York* and its new entertainment site, Vulture.com, have also committed to the slideshow, running several every week.

As page views became a priority, web editors had to decide when slideshows morph from fun novelty to craven solicitation. When I visit sites like The Huffington Post, I start to think the line has been irretrievably crossed. A slideshow's desperation is evident in its headline. "Photos" of something "spectacular," "magnificent," and "amazing." A "Top 10" list that must be seen to be believed! The

hyperbole is hung out there on a string, baiting us to click.

But maybe all this pandering is worth it. Every site is trying to figure out a sustainable business model, and even the most asinine galleries help to subsidize the serious, thoughtful, and wordy articles that don't earn as much traffic. Perhaps we should stop thinking of slideshows as the scourge of online journalism. Instead, we should consider them its savior.

The slideshow's power stems from little more than a trick. Every time a new slide is clicked, a new ad is loaded and a new page view is counted, even if the page itself doesn't refresh. Page views tell advertisers how many times their ad is displayed. So even though it's the same person looking at multiple ads, the ad message is theoretically getting reinforced. Advertisers, according to the sales executives I spoke to, don't necessarily care where the traffic comes from. As long as the number of clicks on their ads don't dip, they're willing, for now, to turn a blind eye to the slideshow's smoke and mirrors.

The page-view trick is dependent on another trick: getting the reader to keep clicking. I've mindlessly clicked through even the most vapid slideshow like a junkie in need of one more hit. So why, from a psychological perspective, are slideshows so effective?

Because humans are novelty-seek-



**Click bait** Dramatic shots, like this one from the recent floods in Pakistan, are part of what make slideshows so appealing.

ers. Emily Yoffe, my former colleague at Slate, has written at length about what motivates our desire for new information. The Internet taps into our insatiable desire for more—more pleasure, more distraction, more news. When we get this new stimulus, dopamine leaks into our brain, making us want to dive even deeper into the web. And diving deeper means clicking further—slide after slide after slide.

Jonah Lehrer, the author of *How We Decide*, furthered Yoffe's work and noted that we especially want to know more about that which we already know. The slideshow format is designed to exploit exactly this. Once we see one slide, we have enough background knowledge to want to see them all.

The pictures also are key. In the developer and web-design community, it's well known that web readers' eyes linger longer on articles and headlines with im-

ages attached to them. That same rule applies with a slideshow.

Some sites have capitalized on our psychological vulnerability more vigorously than others. *The Boston Globe* advertises its slideshows on every article page. (These slideshows range from the serious to the seriously mundane. In September, quarterback Tom Brady's minor car crash merited a thirty-page slideshow, including photos of broken glass.) *Time* links to photo galleries from within articles—while you're reading, a red link asks you to "See the aftermath of the [Pakistani] floods." *Entertainment Weekly* runs multiple slideshows, like "MTV Video Music Awards: 26 Years of the Good, Bad and Ugly," every day, filling its home page's top-story slots with anodyne top-twenty-five lists.

Of course, not all slideshows are born with original sin. Half-naked photo galleries have as much in common with a

serious visual essay as *Maxim* does with *The New Yorker*. So to make sense of the new slideshow economy, I surveyed the field and devised a rough taxonomy:

### **The Gallery**

Aesthetically intriguing but editorially empty, the gallery is photojournalism's most valuable contribution to the economics of web journalism. All slideshows are, in a way, galleries, but the true gallery is defined by its simplicity. The photos do the talking, which means they're usually hyperbolic in their beauty, horror, or strangeness. Typical example: "PHOTOS: Astronauts' Spectacular Twitter Pictures From Space," *The Huffington Post*.

### **The Listicle**

A gallery with more of an editorial bent, listicles are an easy way to trap the completist reader into clicking through the whole thing. Listicle creators are essen-

tially modern-day collectors, assembling and categorizing disparate items to make a larger point. Typical example: "A Complete Guide to Justin Bieber's Dance Moves," *Vulture.com*.

### The Countdown

Little more than a listicle with an extra layer of arbitrary opinion, the countdown is an adaptation of every "Best of" list that appears in magazines and on cable TV at the end of the year. When slides are placed in descending order, the slideshow takes on a narrative momentum, ensuring its audience keeps clicking. Typical example: "The 10 Best Sports Movies of the 2000s," *Bleacher Report*.

### The Timeline

Once again, an organizational framework is applied to the classic gallery, and once again it makes it a more propulsive read. Great timelines are trips through a past the audience either vaguely remembers, or that informs the zeitgeist of the present. Typical example: "The Secret Origins

web, and also the most virulent. As scanty as it is shameless, it's often organized around a theme, celebrity, or body part, the sex show can range from scandalous to staid, depending on the site's editorial tenor. Typical example: "Blake Lively's Breast Looks," *Vulture.com*.

### The Essay

The most dignified of the lot, the slideshow essay is text-heavy, using images as illustrations. Its defining characteristic is a larger narrative woven through all the slides. Focus is on the interplay between images and words. The images amplify the ideas in the text while staying out of its way. Typical example: "The Architecture of Edward Hopper," *Slate*.

DESPITE HOW PREVALENT SLIDESHOWS have become across the web, few sites like talking about how they use them. The *Huffington Post*, *Time*, and *Entertainment Weekly* declined to comment. It's unsurprising. News sites are always loath to discuss internal editorial pro-

telling... ways of conveying information that take advantage of what the medium does well... relative to other media," *Blodget* wrote over e-mail. "Good slide shows help increase engagement (time on site, page views), the same way an excellent article helps increase the amount of time a reader spends with a newspaper or magazine. Bad ones don't help with anything."

But when even bad slideshows succeed economically, where's the incentive to make them good? That incentive, eventually, will have to come from advertisers, as they tire of the tricks that their editorial friends are playing on them. Earlier, I noted that advertisers don't care if dozens of page views are coming from the same user, because their ads are still getting shown. But eventually this will reach a point of diminishing returns. Telling the same person about a new movie a dozen times is not as effective of telling a half-dozen people twice.

Advertisers have an easy way to hold sites accountable: rely on unique visitor, rather than page-view, counts. The page-view metric has become diluted by editorial and business tricks like recirculation tools, landing pages, and slideshows. As *Gawker Media* owner Nick Denton puts it, "Some page views are worth more than others." That's why he now judges his staff and sites' success on a less-manipulated number: how many people come to visit, not how many pages they visit once they're there. Denton's reason for the switch is editorial—he wants more exclusives, and he thinks uniques are a good way to incentivize them. Advertisers should follow suit. Their ads will have greater reach if sites know that it's unique visitors, not page views, that matter most.

And with that change of mentality will come a switch of strategy. No longer will the worst slideshows be as economically viable. Slideshow quality will rise as sites try to create iconic slideshows that bring in new visitors interested in hearing a story told as only the Internet can. Slideshows will no longer have to be a savior in scourge's clothing. **CJR**

---

CHADWICK MATLIN is the former associate editor of *Slate's TheBigMoney.com*. He lives in New York and can be reached at [Chadwick.Matlin@gmail.com](mailto:Chadwick.Matlin@gmail.com).

---

## When even bad slideshows succeed economically, where's the incentive to make them good? That incentive will have to come from advertisers, as they tire of the tricks that their editorial friends are playing on them.

of Clippy: Microsoft's Bizarre Animated Character Patent," *Technologizer*.

### The Aggregator

A visual display of the kitchen sink. When there's a loose scattering of things to be presented, and no good way to present them cohesively, they may as well be presented visually. It's an unadulterated play for your clicks with little editorial value. Typical example: "VOTE: Where Should Arianna Stop on Her 'Third World America' Tour?" *The Huffington Post*.

### The Sex Show

The most noticeable slideshow on the

cesses and traffic figures, and slideshows lie at that uncomfortable nexus.

Of those I contacted, only Henry Blodget offered his thoughts on the slideshow's role. Blodget runs *The Business Insider*, a blog network he started in 2007. Over the past few years, he has gone from disgraced stock analyst to middlebrow media mogul. His network claims to pull in 40 million page views every month.

His sites are havens for slideshows because, according to Blodget, they consider them a story-telling mechanism native to web journalism. "Every new medium develops certain forms of story-

## Tabbed Out

*A key has lost its place*



IN HIS HEYDAY, HE WAS THE ZELIG OF LATE-TWENTIETH-CENTURY journalism, present for every watershed event that appeared in print: Watergate, Baryshnikov's defection, the discovery of BRCA-1 and -2, the premiere of *Hair*, and the less successful rollout of New Coke. And then, like so many who failed to see the web juggernaut coming, he found himself quite literally at the margins of his profession. His services were no longer required.

Before the web, the Tab key defined information the way a recipe gives meaning to a bag of groceries: he imposed shape and structure on masses of notes; he turned raw ingredients into a compelling narrative and signaled the advent of each new idea or quote. (Yes, "He" is anthropomorphic. "It" doesn't elicit much empathy.)

But the philosopher-king of the QWERTY keyboard has no role in the online paragraph, which aligns flush left, with a line space before and after. He has become, instead, a navigator—a traffic cop, jumping from field to field when we buy a plane ticket or deeply discounted argyle socks online.

For journalists old enough to understand that the IBM Selectric ball was not a gala social event, or to recall the emphatic shudder of a returning typewriter carriage, Tab has transitioned from friend to potential foe: hit him by mistake for a paragraph indent in an e-mail, and he might bop right down to the character-setting field, swapping Western ISO-8859-1, which is what you want, for Vietnamese, which is not. Use him in the text of a blog post and you may have to re-format the entire thing.

Like many of us, Tab has a new gig, no nostalgia for the past, and no compassion for those of us who are mired in it. His repurposed life provides a nice focus for the defining question of transition journalism: What does it all mean?

Depending on whom you ask, the Tab-less web paragraph is either an icon of a brave new world or a symbol of the media apocalypse. John Gould, deputy editor at Theatlantic.com, considers the new order to be nothing more than a practical response to reader behavior. "What I think this is really about is speed," he says, citing user-experience studies that show online readers moving at a faster clip than print readers. "The 'single return, tabbed new graph' format is a design that emerged over time in relation to the flow of immersed, non-distracted reading. The 'double return, no-Tab new graf' is more friendly to rapid reading, or even reading that shifts between rapid and outright scanning."

In other words, the disappearance of the tabbed indent is merely an evolu-

tionary step, like the disappearance of gills. Lisa Belkin, a writer for *The New York Times*, agrees. Belkin first found herself shortening her paragraphs for the *Times Sunday Magazine*; now she shortens them further for the flush-left landscape of her blog, Motherlode. "Long paragraphs look endlessly long and snakelike on a magazine page," she says, even with the traditional indent to define them, "as opposed to stories in the regular paper, which don't run full page, but tend to be broken up by a jump." And "blog style is snappier," which she admits is a euphemism for shorter, so she's adapted yet again.

When she hits the Tab key, it's by mistake. "It's a vestigial tic, I guess," she says.

But graphic designer Walter Bernard, who for over twenty-five years has thought about how type sits on the page, including during stints as the art director for *Time* and *New York*, is troubled by the post-Tab universe. It's not that he cares so much about how a paragraph begins—it's that the end of the indented paragraph seems to him to be part of a larger design free-for-all.

Bernard is particularly offended by what can only be called the "stealth indent," which makes the old-fashioned print advertorial seem innocent by comparison. "I went to a link and read the first three lines," he says, "and suddenly it reconfigured itself to wrap around an ad that intrudes after I've started. Instead of reading something that's thirty picas wide, now I'm reading something that's fifteen picas wide. It may be temporary, but they really do capture you that way: the ad comes in as a delay and intrudes, and reorients your reading. It was clever, but also totally annoying."

Pauses—the places where writers used to insert a single line space to define a section of a longer piece—are anybody's guess, design-wise. Now that the line space has replaced Tab, what replaces the line space? Belkin uses a row of asterisks. *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Jon Carroll uses boldface to open a new section. Even # and + find that they have more work than they used to. The death of Tab could signal a dingbat renaissance, and certainly an outcry

from dingbats, demanding a new, more dignified title.

THE END OF PROSE AS WE KNOW IT—INDENTED—turns out to be the work of the banking industry. Forty years ago, banks were early adopters of computerized systems that enabled them to build a big customer database. Back then, basic computer language assigned a box for each character or number in a piece of information, making sure to allocate enough boxes to accommodate long names. When a client like Steve Lee came along, there was lots of wasted space. “If they left fifteen boxes for the first name, there would be ten empty boxes for mine,” says Lee, an associate professor of information technology at Colorado Mountain College. Multiply those blanks by a bank’s total number of customers, and there were “lots and lots of empty spaces in the data, taking up room that computers didn’t have back then.”

They needed what Lee calls a “delimiter,” a keystroke that told the computer to close up a field early and jump to the next one. At first, they used characters like commas and semicolons, but as databases expanded to include memo fields, a new challenge arose: to avoid any keystroke that might appear in the memo field. That eliminated every letter of the alphabet, symbols, punctuation marks, even the space bar, which defines the blank between words. Keys cannot multitask because a computer can’t distinguish between a comma that sets off a phrase and a comma that’s a signal to move on.

The only remaining candidates for the job were the Tab key and the Enter key. Enter already had a job starting new lines in the memo field. So people who cared about data and not about paragraphs gave Tab a new assignment, years before the World Wide Web embraced the idea.

It turned out to be a career-saving move, as the tabbed indent was destined to become a casualty of technology. Computers are control freaks, as anyone who has ever mistyped a web address will attest. They simply refuse to acknowledge a random blob of white space at the start of a paragraph; they require more exacting instructions. “It

is better for the computer to be explicitly told, ‘This is the beginning of a paragraph’ and ‘This is the end,’” says Robert Morris, emeritus professor of computer science at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. “A computer is completely rule-based about format. It can’t tell what that white space is—and if you put in a Tab to indent something like a long quote, you’re only fine until you have to edit, and the indents go all over the place because you’ve added something.

“The computer’s not as smart as someone sitting at a Mergenthaler Linotype was,” Morris says.

There it is: in the hot-type era, Linotype machines didn’t use Tab keys for indents because human intelligence took care of them. Computers don’t use Tab keys for indents, or bother with paragraph indents at all, because artificial intelligence gets flustered by that kind of white space.

---

## The Tab key used to be a policeman, all about rules; now it’s the tour guide.

While journalists might mourn the demise of a basic element of written thought, computer scientists say we have it all wrong: in the realm of the Internet, the Tab key is king. “From an application standpoint—the Internet, forms, the way data is stored—it’s the most important key,” says Lee. “It used to be a policeman, all about rules. Now it can take you anywhere on the screen and be okay. It’s the tour guide.”

Says Morris: “It’s a promotion, not a demotion.”

Understanding how and why Tab abandoned writers is not quite the same as knowing what to do about it, and all this talk about style hides a darker cascade of concerns about content: the flush-left web design encour-

ages shorter paragraphs because long ones look wrong; short paragraphs lead to shallow writing; shallow writing leads to shallow thinking. Before you can say complexities of the economic crisis, we are suffering from a national attention-deficit disorder. Nobody can think about anything long enough to fix it.

But Jon Carroll, whose 850-word column for *The San Francisco Chronicle* has appeared five days a week since 1982, is philosophical about the long-term consequences of short-bite style. “I don’t think technology dictates ideas, which is very un-McLuhan of me,” he says. “Maybe people will write in shorter paragraphs, but what the hell—if you made Emerson write in short grafts he’d still be Emerson. Brevity is the soul of everything and the enemy of corporate-speak.”

If that’s not solace enough, there’s always the loyalist reader, who tends to have old-school tastes. M. Scott Havens, the vice-president of digital operations and strategy at *The Atlantic*, is something of a media diplomat; while he has never worked in traditional print, he proudly subscribes to two newspapers. He expects that people who want long, in-depth coverage will continue to do so, and he finds odd comfort in the fact that there have never been a lot of them. “The influentials—smart, affluent, educated people—are going to carve out time to read the deep think-piece about health-care legislation,” he says. “Curiosity isn’t going to go away.”

Or, as Carroll puts it, “We’ll have as many deep thinkers as we have now. They’re always a tiny minority.”

Gould believes they’re going to want the coverage they’re used to, arranged in the indented paragraphs they’re used to. “The demand’s going to be there, so tech designers with the most foresight are going to make sure to preserve the Tab key.”

If he has any spare time after his day job ends, that is. **CJR**

---

KAREN STABINER, the author of eight books and the editor of an essay anthology, began her journalism career writing articles for her high school newspaper on a beautiful manual Underwood. She is an adjunct professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

## Disclose This

*The press should treat big tech companies like Big Pharma*

ON AUGUST 9, GOOGLE AND VERIZON ANNOUNCED AN ALLIANCE IN WHICH Google, the champion of the free, open Internet, would partially bow to Verizon's long-held position that purveyors of certain types of content should pay to get priority when using Verizon's Internet network. Seeking savvy commentary on a high-stakes public-policy story that had Washington and Silicon Valley abuzz, *Newsweek* published a quick Q&A on its website with Harvard law professor Jonathan Zittrain.

For *Newsweek*, Zittrain was an obvious choice: the co-founder and co-director of Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet & Society, he has become a go-to source for any technology reporter. He is also a kind of academic messiah of "network neutrality," the philosophy that holds that all Internet content should be treated equally in terms of access. This has always been Google's mantra, too: "Google's business interests align nicely with openness," Zittrain assured *The Washington Post's* readers in a May 2008 Q&A.

So those who have followed Zittrain's work might reasonably have assumed he would have howled from the rooftops that Google had struck a deal with the closed-network devil. But when *Newsweek* asked him, "Has Google sold out? Are they no longer the 'Don't be evil' company?" the Harvard law professor held his fire:

I wouldn't expect Google to do much more than represent its own interests—which may overlap with that of the average Internet user, but not always. So I'd take both Google and Verizon at their word that they offer the framework as a suggestion, and then it's up to the public—and its elected representatives—to decide what to do with the proposal.

Zittrain's diplomatic approach was worlds apart from the reaction of his fellow open-web warriors, who unloaded on Google and the deal. For example, Gigi B. Sohn, the president of Public Knowledge, whose stated mission is to "defend citizens' rights in the emerging digital culture," told *The New York Times* on August 10: "We've seen what happens when powerful corporations are allowed to operate without clear and enforceable rules, the financial crisis and the BP oil spill being two examples."

In media and policy circles, Zittrain's reaction was an important bullet for Google to have dodged. How bad could Google's alliance with Verizon be if Jonathan Zittrain wasn't upset about it? But what readers weren't told is that Google has been the Berkman Center's biggest corporate donor in recent years. The cen-

ter's co-directors, John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, told me in an e-mail in June that Google contributed roughly \$500,000 over the last two years, part of the 10 percent of Berkman's overall operating budget of approximately \$5 million that comes from corporate donors. Berkman lists Google as a contributor on its website, but does not specify its prominence. (Disclosure: In January, I was turned down for a part-time freelance research/writing job at Berkman.)

The only information that *Newsweek* provided readers about Zittrain was that he is a Harvard law professor and co-director of the Berkman Center. Dan Lyons, *Newsweek's* technology editor who interviewed Zittrain, declined to comment about whether he had asked Zittrain about any potential conflicts or if Zittrain had disclosed any. Kathleen Deveny, who was Lyons's editor on the piece, said *Newsweek* did not ask Zittrain about potential conflicts.

None of this is to suggest that, because Google gives Berkman a significant amount of money, Zittrain simply does Google's bidding when he weighs in on the various policy debates that swirl around major technology companies like Google, Microsoft, Apple, and AT&T. But the Berkman-Google example suggests a new frontier in the press's role in alerting the public to potential conflicts of interest with the sources they rely on for expertise.

The press, broadly speaking, has a checkered history when it comes to fulfilling this role. Its most prominent failure in this regard is probably the disclosure of ties between health-care professionals and the big drug manufacturers who fund their research and their conferences. The problem is so widespread that there is now a website, [HealthNewsReview.org](http://HealthNewsReview.org), devoted in part to identifying and correcting conflict-of-interest and similar problems with the coverage of health care issues.

As digital communication becomes more central to our lives and our work, technology companies like Google have more at stake in the public-policy decisions that affect the evolution of communication systems—such as the debate over net neutrality.

*The New York Times* quoted Zittrain at least twelve times in the last two

THE  
**JAMES ARONSON  
AWARD FOR  
SOCIAL JUSTICE  
JOURNALISM**

DEPARTMENT OF  
FILM & MEDIA STUDIES  
HUNTER COLLEGE

We seek significant reporting on social justice issues, including discrimination based on race, class, gender, sexual or religious orientation; economic injustice; violations of civil liberties and free expression; and brutality to civilians in war. Analytical coverage of conflict in the Middle East, globalization and responses to terrorism are of particular interest.

The award recognizes print journalism in profit and non-profit newspapers, magazines, newsletters and online publications. An award is also given for "Cartooning With a Conscience" to honor social justice graphics demonstrating clear, consistent ethical vision.

— 2009 WINNERS —

**A.C. Thompson**, "Katrina's Hidden Race War," *The Nation*.

**JoAnn Wypijewski** for original reporting on the intersections of social and sexual issues.

**Mother Jones Magazine** for coverage of climate change.

**Nina Bernstein** for coverage of immigration in *The New York Times*.

**Jen Sorenson**, "Cartooning With a Conscience."

DEADLINE FOR 2010 AWARDS:  
Postmarked JANUARY 7, 2011

For entry form, fees, details &  
information on past winners:  
[filmmedia.hunter.cuny.edu/aronson](http://filmmedia.hunter.cuny.edu/aronson)

years on issues related to Google or its rivals. In most cases, only his academic affiliation was provided to readers. (Sometimes he was also identified as author of his 2008 book, *The Future of The Internet—And How to Stop It*.) "We don't have specific written policies on what questions you should ask a source before you start interviewing them," says Philip B. Corbett, the *Times's* associate managing editor for standards.

Asked what the difference was between the Berkman-Google connection and a recent *Times* story on Eli Lilly in which readers were told that the expert quoted—the dean of the medical school at the University of Virginia— "has consulted for Lilly and other companies," Corbett says: "Medical writers and health writers have become much more aware of this nexus and have gotten used to, almost as a matter of course, when you're writing about a drug trial, to ask whether there's a connection and to disclose that."

In a subsequent interview, Corbett told me he had visited Berkman's website and, "It looked to me as though they get funding from a lot of sources. I'm not sure that necessarily raises a flag, because they have multiple funding sources.... In a case where an academic is getting directly paid by the company, you'd want to know."

At *The Wall Street Journal*, Zittrain has been asked to opine at least nine times in the last two years on issues related to Google and its rivals, with only his academic affiliation provided. (Again, sometimes his 2008 book was cited.) Ashley Huston, Dow Jones's senior communications director, said via e-mail that, "While there is no formal policy" at the paper about what to disclose when quoting academics or other expert sources, "we do our level best to tease out conflicts and disclose them to readers when we believe it's warranted." Nick Wingfield, a technology reporter at the *Journal*, said in a brief telephone interview that, though he wasn't sure whether the paper had a policy on this, "As a general rule I ask people if they are consultants or if they worked with somebody that they're commenting on."

As for the supply side of the expert-quote equation, Harvard has been shor-

ing up its own policies regarding conflicts of interest in the wake of several high-profile cases of undisclosed industry ties involving employees at its medical school and affiliated institutions. On August 19, four days after *Newsweek* published its Q&A with Zittrain, B. D. Colen, Harvard's senior communications officer for university science, who said he speaks for the university and not the law school, said that the university is in the process of requiring all schools within the next nine to twelve months to "meet or exceed" new conflict-of-interest guidelines. These include a provision regarding disclosure that would appear to have required Zittrain to spell out the Google connection in his interview with *Newsweek* (emphasis mine):

To promote the transparency essential to societal trust in the University and its faculty, faculty members receiving financial support for their academic work... are expected to disclose such interests and sources of support in all publications, public reports, *communications to the media*, and formal presentations, written or oral, concerning that work.... *Disclosure of support and financial interests is also expected when faculty members are sought as experts to inform the public on matters of concern and to help shape public policy.*

But journalists shouldn't rely on their sources to disclose real or potential conflicts. Just as medical writers have learned to pay attention to the nexus between Big Pharma and the research and drug trials conducted by academics, similar questions about the nexus between technology companies and the academics they support should become a standard part of a journalist's tool kit when they turn to experts to sort through complicated matters of technology policy. Having a financial connection to a story doesn't necessarily disqualify someone from commenting on it. But disclosing that connection is part of the journalist's duty to his audience. **CJR**

EMILY BRILL has written for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and for *The Daily Beast*. She has worked at *MSNBC's* Morning Joe and for *Journalism Online, LLC*. She lives in New York.

## *Serious Fun With Numbers*

*We're drowning in data, but few reporters know how to use them*

THE STORY WAS ALREADY GREAT, EVEN BEFORE DANIEL GILBERT OPENED HIS first spreadsheet. Thousands of citizens in the southern Virginia area Gilbert covered for the *Bristol Herald Courier* (daily circulation: 30,000) had leased their mineral rights to oil and gas companies in exchange for royalties. Twenty years later, they alleged, the companies had not paid, adding up to potentially millions of dollars owed. As Gilbert learned, the complaint was complicated. It involved esoteric oil and gas practices and regulations, a virtually unknown state oversight agency, the rules of escrow accounts—and finally, some very angry people and a handful of very big companies. With these facts alone, he could have written a stellar story giving voice to citizens' complaints, and shining a light on a little-known regulatory agency. That, in many newsrooms, would have been plenty.

But Gilbert, who officially covered the courts for the paper, wasn't satisfied simply to raise the specter of noncompliance. Whenever a well produced natural gas, the energy company was supposed to make a monthly payment into a corresponding escrow account. These payment schedules were public. So were the production records. All Gilbert had to do was match the production records with the payment schedules to see who had—and had not—been paid.

Easier said than done. Gilbert requested the information he needed and received spreadsheets with thousands of rows of information. In Excel, a typical computer monitor displays less than a hundred rows and ten wide columns. Gilbert's data was much too massive to cram into this relatively modest template. So he started with one month's worth of information, using the program's "find" function to match wells and their corresponding accounts. One by one. Control-f, control-f, control-f. It was tedious and time-consuming. There was a story there, he was certain. But control-f would not find it.

What would you do? Could you navigate, process, and make sense of thousands of rows of data? If you have not yet had to ask yourself this question, there is no time like the present.

Most journalists are just like Gilbert, with daily computer skills that include Internet searches, word processing, and maybe some basic calculations in Excel, none of which enables journalists to truly mine large collections of data. Meanwhile, the amount of raw data available to journalists has mushroomed. At the federal level, the Obama administration's "open government" initiative has given rise to new sources like Data.gov, a website devoted to the aggregation and easy dissemination of national data sets. State and local governments have followed suit, making much of the data they collect available online. More elusive tranches of

data have been pried loose by nonprofit organizations courtesy of the Freedom of Information Act; an inquisitive journalist can download them in minutes. "I'm constantly amazed and surprised about what's out there," said Thomas Hargrove, a national correspondent for Scripps-Howard News Service who often leads data-based research projects for the chain's fourteen newspapers and nine television stations.

Against this backdrop, the ability to find, manipulate, and analyze data has become increasingly important, not only for teams of investigative journalists, but for beat reporters. It is hard to conceive of a beat that doesn't generate data—even arts reporters evaluate budgets and have access to nonprofit organizations' tax returns. What's more, because the universe of data is vast and growing, and the stories that use it are rare, data-based journalism has become a powerful way to stand out in the crowded news cycle. "When you acquire a certain level of data skills and literacy, you can punch way above your weight," says Derek Willis, a web developer at *The New York Times* and author of the computer-assisted reporting blog, *The Scoop*. "Simply put, you can do things others can't."

---

**Daniel Gilbert convinced his editors he needed training. In return, he won a Pulitzer.**

And last but certainly not least, readers *like* data. They like charts and interactive graphics and searchable databases. At *The Texas Tribune*, which has published more than three dozen interactive databases and usually adds or updates one a week on average, the data sets account for 75 percent of the site's overall traffic.

Of course, news-gathering organizations have to some degree understood

## Announcing The 2011 Robert Novak Journalism Fellowship Program

*\$50,000 and \$25,000 Fellowships*

Print or online journalists with less than ten years experience may apply for the 2011 Robert Novak Journalism Fellowship Program offering \$50,000 full-time and \$25,000 part-time fellowships. Winners undertake a one-year project of their choosing focusing on journalism supportive of American culture and a free society. In addition, there are separate fellowships for topics on the environment, on the benefits of free-market competition, and on law enforcement. Fellowships commence September 1. Must be a U.S. citizen. Application deadline: February 22.

For applications and more information, visit our website or write:

Mr. John Farley • The Phillips Foundation  
One Massachusetts Avenue NW, Suite 620  
Washington, DC 20001  
Telephone 202-250-3887 ext. 609  
Email: jfarley@thephillipsfoundation.org  
www.thephillipsfoundation.org  
Deadline February 22, 2011

"Preserve your independence...  
**WRITE BOLDLY** and  
**TELL THE TRUTH** fearlessly."  
—JOSEPH MEDILL, 1869

Entries now being accepted for:

### The Medill Medal for Courage in Journalism

Honoring the Heroes  
of Our Profession

**Contest Period:** 2010

calendar year

**Entry Fee:** \$40

**Deadline:** February 1, 2011

**Prize:** \$5,000

www.medill.northwestern.edu/  
about/sponsoredawards.aspx

**MEDILL**  
Northwestern University

the value and power of data for more than twenty years. Bill Dedman's 1989 Pulitzer-winning investigation into the racist lending practices of Atlanta banks relied heavily on database reporting and was widely seen as a validation of computer geeks in the newsroom.

But even after many organizations hired computer-assisted reporting specialists, using data for stories has usually been limited to big investigations and projects. And with good reason: years ago, data-driven stories were almost prohibitively inefficient to write. A reporter had to identify what data he needed and which agency collected them; it often took a FOIA request to secure the data, which tended to arrive in sheaves of dot-matrix-printed paper. It was then up to the reporters to build their databases—by hand.

newsroom. Gilbert, however, knew who did: Investigative Reporters and Editors. For years, this journalism nonprofit has been running computer-assisted reporting workshops, called Boot Camps, on the University of Missouri campus in Columbia and around the country. At the six-day workshop, Gilbert would learn how to use spreadsheets and a more sophisticated database management program—the two fundamental tools he needed to manipulate the data he had. The only issue was getting Foster to say yes.

That was hardly a slam dunk. Of course, Foster wanted Gilbert to nail down the story. But as one of seven reporters on staff at the *Herald Courier*, Gilbert typically generated three or four stories a week. His colleagues would have to scramble to fill the hole during

---

These days, the main obstacle to more and better uses of data by journalists is not the technology or the ability to access the information, but rather the interests and aptitudes of reporters and their editors.

That's not the case anymore. Agencies maintain and disseminate their data electronically. While there are still plenty of data sets that require diligence, persistence, and FOIA requests, many can be accessed without even speaking with a human being. And in the newsroom, every reporter has a spreadsheet program like Excel or can find one for free online. The logjam, these days, has more to do with reporters' and editors' interests and aptitudes—with their capacity for number-crunching—than it does with technology.

AT THE BRISTOL PAPER, GILBERT CLEARLY needed help. His editor, Todd Foster, had been Gilbert's champion and mentor on the story thus far, but he knew little about managing thousands of rows of data. Neither did anyone else in the

his absence. Then there was the cost. The *Herald Courier* and its parent company, Media General, were suffering the same economic hardships as the rest of the newspaper industry. In 2009, Media General mandated fifteen furlough days for most of its 4,700-plus employees, equivalent to a 5.8 percent pay cut. Sending Gilbert to Missouri, in this climate, was not an easy sell: tuition for the workshop was \$560, plus travel to and from Columbia, lodging, and meals for a week. The total came to around \$1,240, and the reporter would need to use his vacation days to attend.

Still, a potentially important story and six months of work hung in the balance. That weekend, Foster called on the paper's publisher at home, with a few cans of Red Bull and a bottle of vodka in hand. They covered a variety

of business issues, and “at the end of the night, I sprung the Boot Camp on him,” Foster recalls. “He said, ‘Is it worth it?’ I said, ‘It’s worth it. And in April, it might really be worth it.’” Soon Gilbert was on his way to Missouri.

Foster never told Gilbert they expected him to win a Pulitzer for their trouble—at least not in so many words. But the reporter understood that the expectations were high. “They didn’t send me there saying, ‘Go have fun,’” he notes. “It was more like, ‘This better be worth it.’ I felt a good deal of pressure to make it count.”

This is a fairly standard expectation. Most newsrooms assume that journalists will immediately put their new skills into practice. When Reuters recently sent six beat reporters to one of the IRE Boot Camps, they were all required to pitch a story to work on while they attended the session. “We want to see the stories,” said Claudia Parsons, Reuters’ deputy enterprise editor for the Americas. “That will be the test.”

At the same time, making database skills and training a priority can be tough for overburdened reporters and editors. Nor do journalism schools necessarily give such skills pride of place—in fact, many teach them piecemeal, if at all. At the graduate level, New York University requires students in its Science, Health, and Environmental Reporting (SHERP) concentration to obtain a solid grounding in numeracy. In other concentrations, however, these skills play a smaller role. The Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism offers a handful of relevant classes, including investigative reporting, a course called Evidence and Inference, and a new addition, Digital Media: Interactive Workshop, which stresses storytelling through data and interactive presentation. But there is no data course that all students must take in order to graduate. “We don’t require every student to know how to use Excel in the same way we require them to know how to use FinalCut Pro or a digital camera,” said Bill Grueskin, Dean of Academic Affairs at Columbia. As a result, many students remain stuck at control-f.

WHAT GILBERT LEARNED IN MISSOURI turned out to be indispensable. He took

his spreadsheets with him, and learned how to transfer the data from Excel to Microsoft Access, a database management program better suited to large searches. (Funnily enough, Gilbert actually had a copy of Access on his desk-top back in Bristol; he just didn’t know what it was for.) And he absorbed a basic programming language called Structured Query Language, or SQL, which allowed him to search for specific patterns in his data.

Eventually, Gilbert got his data cleaned and organized enough to be able to write his fundamental query: Show me the accounts that correspond to wells where oil or gas has been produced, but royalties have not been paid. What he found was damning. “Of about 750 individual accounts in escrow, between 22 percent and 55 percent received no royalty payments during months when the corresponding wells produced gas over an 18-month period,” Gilbert wrote in the first of an eight-part series. As for royalty payments that *had* been made, \$24 million was lying in escrow, in dispute. Over the course of the series, Gilbert explained the history of the dispute, took the state gas and oil board to task, and showed that citizens who were allegedly owed thousands were being told they were entitled to less than a dime. His series spurred the Virginia legislature to investigate ways to distribute the money in escrow to the people who own it. In April, Gilbert won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service.

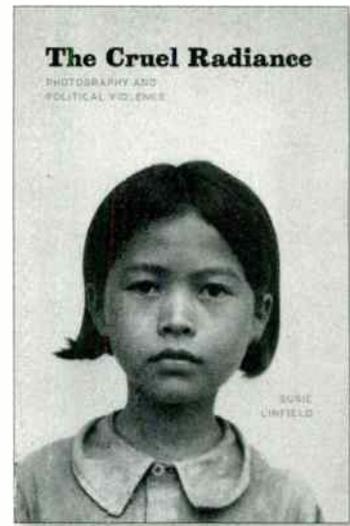
After the prize was announced, Foster told Gilbert that the *Herald Courier* had been hearing about the escrow fund and the government mismanagement for years. “Two prior managing editors had spiked the story,” Foster said. “Royalties, methane gas, escrow accounts—it’s not the sexiest story.” In these earlier cases, nobody had been able to break through the data roadblock. Gilbert, who moved to Houston in October to cover the oil and gas industry for *The Wall Street Journal*, says that he thought it was a “pretty good story” to begin with. “But the data changed it,” he adds. “Instead of just asking the question, I was able to answer it.” CJR

JANET PASKIN is the personal finance editor for *The Wall Street Journal Digital Network*.

# The Cruel Radiance

PHOTOGRAPHY AND  
POLITICAL VIOLENCE

SUSIE LINFIELD



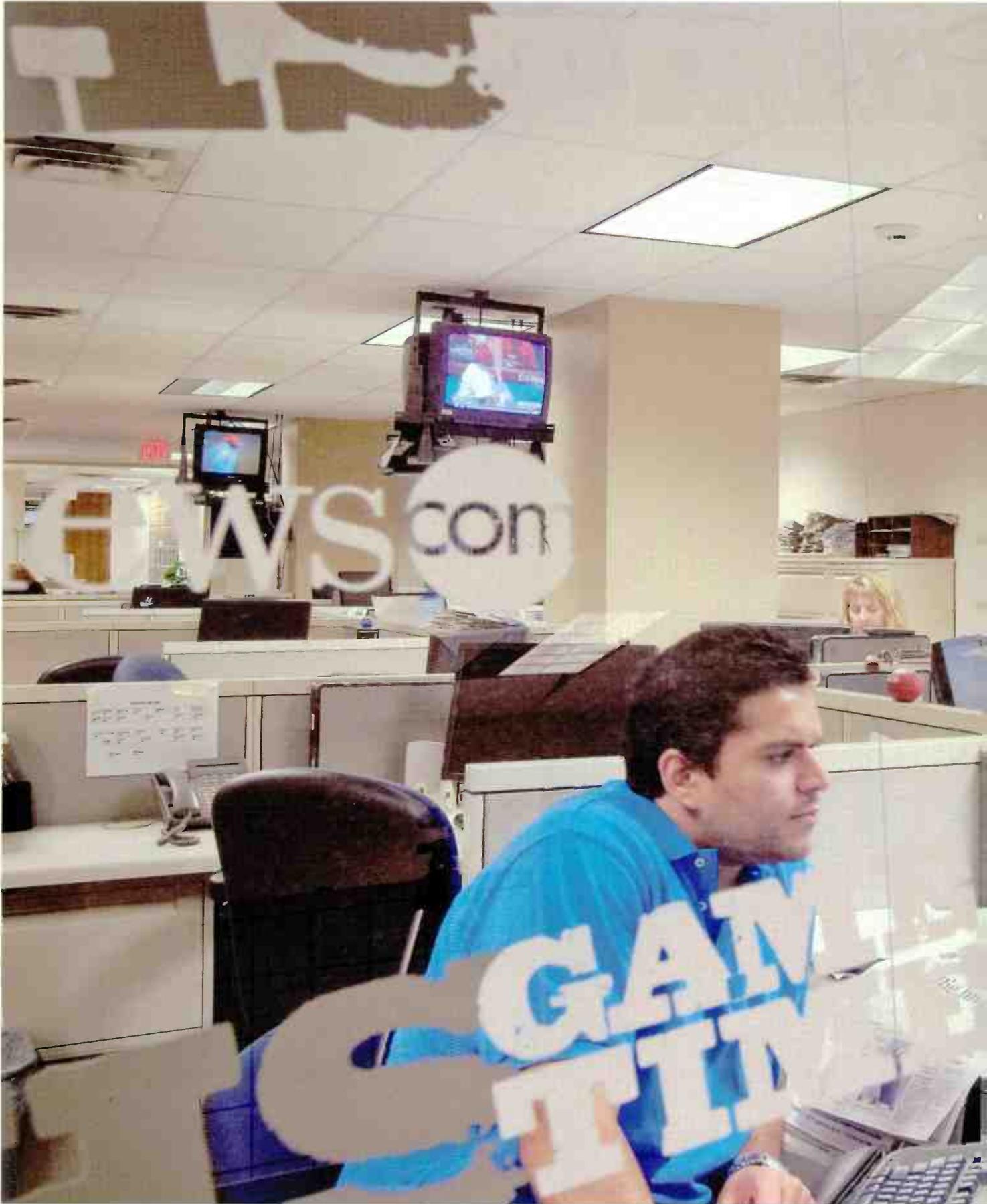
“A profoundly thoughtful account of the role of photojournalism in an irredeemably violent world, Linfield’s book is as much about conscience and empathy as it is about photography. Examining images from the Spanish Civil War to Rwanda, she accepts no easy, sweeping answers. Rather, with vivid common sense and with painstaking, often abashed humanity, she guides us through the moral minefield where horror meets art, and helps us to see.”

—Claudia Roth Pierpont

Cloth \$30.00



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS  
www.press.uchicago.edu





27

# A Media Policy For the Digital Age

*An open letter to the FCC*

BY STEVE COLL

Steven Waldman  
Future of Media Project  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 12th Street, SW  
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Steve,

Welcome back to Washington, belatedly. It was a year ago that the Federal Communications Commission announced your appointment as senior adviser and leader of the Future of Media Project, an inspired choice in light of your distinctive and distinguished background as a print journalist and web entrepreneur. It is a privilege to take on any assignment to advance the public interest,

but we permanent residents of the capital apologize for your working conditions. For some reason the people who organize federal office buildings prefer to crowd policymakers like you into cramped warrens without ambient light. I hope the setting has at least concentrated your mind.

To some extent, as often happens in policymaking, the Future of Media Project's mandate requires you to review questions to which the answers are known. Your purpose, as you have written, is to "assess whether all Americans have access to vibrant, diverse sources of news and information that will enable them to enrich their lives, their communities, and our democracy." Only two in five Americans can name the three branches of their constitutional government, so it would be surprising if you brought forward a simple "yes" in reply to that question. In fact, we are expecting that some time around the end of the year you'll issue a report that will lay out, in a detailed and hardheaded way, the options for pub-

lic policy reform that might strengthen the media's contributions to American democracy and civic health.

That is the critical question for the FCC and other Washington agencies—whether there are specific decisions Congress or regulators can take to bolster journalism's centuries-old role in our constitutional system as a watchdog, educator, and convener of the public square. The answer seems clear: we badly require new policies and new thinking in Washington because the media policy regime we have inherited is out of date and inadequate for the times in which we live.

I recognize that this is not a mainstream view among journalists. We have been passing through a period of upheaval in our profession. We have seen the collapse of traditional newspaper business models, the hemorrhaging of thousands of well-paying newsroom jobs, and the rise of disruptive—and highly promising—new digital technologies and social media. Still, many journalists seem to abhor the idea that government should enact any new laws or reallocate any federal funding in response to these changes.

Admirably, journalists carry powerful antibodies to any hint that government might encroach on press freedom. Unfortunately, as a result, our profession often seems unable to explore public policy questions affecting the media in a serious way. For example, when the staff of the Federal Trade Commission, a few blocks north and west of your office, circulated a draft report earlier this year that listed possible new policy ideas to strengthen journalism—some of them, admittedly, very bad ideas—the reaction from the press was not constructive. On *Reliable Sources*, media reporter Howard Kurtz said that he understood that "the government has always provided indirect subsidies like postal subsidies, and there's funding to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting." Yet, he continued, "I personally think it's a horrible idea for the government to give any kind of funding, because it carries the aura of politicization." Such purism—which if adopted probably would kill off *Big Bird*, *Frontline*, and *PBS NewsHour*, and seriously damage *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition*—seems on its face extreme. It accurately reflects, however, the from-the-gut tenor of anti-government thinking among journalists that has, I'm afraid, helped to confuse many of the issues you are reviewing for the FCC.

The question you confront is not whether the government should allocate public funds to shape media and jour-



# REBOOT

nalism. It already does. We have inherited a policy regime that is breathtaking in its scope and impact, and that goes well beyond mail subsidies and CPB funds, important though those have been. It exists in part because journalism is a form of commerce that must be taxed and regulated like all other commerce. Also, a great deal of journalism is influenced by government regulation because it is delivered across public or quasi-public property: the airwaves, government-granted cable monopolies, satellite bands, and the like. It would be no wiser to abandon altogether the policies that set rules and allocate funds across this system than it would be to stop regulating oil leases in ocean waters or maintaining public parks.

The problem is that the media policies that govern us in 2010—a patchwork stitched from the ideas of Calvin Coolidge's Republican Party, Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, and Ronald Reagan's deregulatory wave—have been overtaken by technological change.

From the country's founding, American media and journalism have been continually remade by technological innovation. Political pamphlets made room for industrially printed newspapers, which made room for the telegraph, which made room for radio, which made room for broadcast

television, which made room for cable and satellite services, which made room for the World Wide Web, which is making room even as we read this for the Kindle, iPad, and mobile phone applications.

When such technological, industrial, and economic changes dislodge the assumptions underlying public policy, the smart response is to update and adjust policy in order to protect the public interest. And politically plausible reforms that would clearly serve the public are within reach. It is time to reboot the system.

IN FAIRNESS TO THE SKEPTICS, THE MEDIA POLICY DEBATE that has occurred in Washington since the World Wide Web arrived has been polluted by parochialism. As the Great Recession descended in 2008, for example, newspaper publishers sidled up to Congress to seek further antitrust exemptions. That economically harmless, if morally unattractive, proposal made it seem that publishers and their friends on the Hill believed the future of journalism was inseparable from the future of newspapers. That is obviously untrue.

There followed a series of proposals focused primarily, it often seemed, on the replacement of laid-off reporters' incomes—a proposal, for example, to issue citizen vouchers

to pay for arts or journalism; another to establish a journalism division within Americorps; and my own thinking aloud at a Senate hearing about incorporating journalism within the writ of the National Endowment for the Humanities. All of these ideas suffered from a whiff of desperation; they were also implausible politically.

The Knight Foundation, the Open Society Institute, Herbert and Marion Sandler, and other philanthropists have lately funded a more convincing series of nonprofit journalism experiments, and some of them—ProPublica, for example—have already produced exemplary work. None of these nonprofit experiments can yet claim to be self-sustaining, however.

In such an environment it is easy to sympathize with the media analyst Jeff Jarvis, who argues, “The only way that journalism is going to be sustainable is if it is profitable.” The great majority of American journalism has always been and

---

## The question we should focus on is whether existing policy still serves the public interest.

always will be conducted within for-profit enterprises. At present, much of the print and digital news media are finding healthy profits to be elusive, but we should hope and assume that journalism will eventually benefit again from the independence, innovation, and continual regeneration that often arise with the profit motive.

Even in emphasizing this point, however, we do not absolve ourselves of the need to reform our aging media policy regime. Ideologically diverse politicians constructed that regime during the twentieth century precisely to manage the public interest within a market-dominated system. If those old policies are reformed and modernized—as I hope you and your FCC colleagues will recommend—the philosophical premise that market forces should predominantly shape American journalism need not and should not change.

Fortunately, in your windowless chamber at the Commission, Steve, you are in the right federal agency to recast the media policy debate in this way. The FCC oversees a large section of the historical media policy regime and can make constructive recommendations about the rest of that regime. You have an opportunity to look carefully, with a wonk’s Coke-bottle glasses, at the laws and regulations we already have, to see how they are working and how they might be improved, given the changes technology has lately wrought.

Our inherited policy regime is constructed on a foundation of more than a dozen major pieces of federal legislation, as well as in the regulatory rules and state and local laws. One of the most important underlying statutes, as you know, is the Communications Act of 1934, which created the FCC in the first place. The act is a successor to the Radio Act of 1927,

which was passed by a Republican-led Congress at the end of the Coolidge boom years.

We needed these laws at the time to manage chaos and to define the public’s interest as new technologies remade journalism. Unregulated radio broadcasting had produced a cacophony of crossed signals on the public airwaves. To impose order, Congress adopted a geographical scheme. To undergird it, the bill’s authors borrowed from public utility regulators the principled language that would guide specific policy decisions about broadcast media for decades, up to this day: that broadcasting should be managed by the government in the “public interest, convenience, or necessity.”

How, exactly, to interpret and meet this standard has been much debated since then. The practical issues flowing from Congress’s public interest aspirations changed continually as media technologies changed, and as powerful commercial interests lobbied for favors. The result is a system in which federal, state, and local regulators pervasively set the economic conditions in which for-profit and nonprofit journalism is produced, while, at the same time, they require certain noncommercial activities from licensees, meant to promote and protect the public interest.

The FCC oversees, primarily in broadcasting, the ways in which the public is compensated—in cash or by mandated public interest endeavors—for the use of scarce spectrum on the airwaves. At the heart of this regime, the commission oversees formal “public interest obligations” undertaken by broadcasters in exchange for their licenses to operate. I want to return to those obligations shortly, because I think they offer a large opportunity for reform.

Your colleagues oversee a large number of other media policies designed to defend the public interest: political speech regulations, children’s television regulations, emergency broadcasting rules, the “equal time” rule governing the access of politicians to airwaves during election campaigns, and other rules designed to protect the public.

Separately, through implementation of the “must carry” rules passed by Congress (also justified in the name of the public interest), local cable regulators across the country have, in effect, constructed the economics of local television news. They have done this by ensuring that local broadcast stations could expand their metropolitan audiences as the number of cable customers increased. “Must carry” laws meant that, as cable systems grew rapidly after the 1970s, cable monopolists operating under government charter had no choice but to carry—for free—local stations that they might not otherwise have supported. Thus the pervasive “Action News” culture of local broadcast stations made indelible by Ted Baxter on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* is not the adaptive survivor of pure Darwinian free-market forces. Federal law nurtured it. C-SPAN, too, is a direct product of cable regulatory mandates.

In the print world, postal subsidies are one example of how federal law has molded the economics of journalism. Just as mandating the “public interest, convenience, or necessity” was an intentional statement of principle by Congress, so was the enactment of postal subsidies for the press in the eighteenth century. George Washington and James Madison

recommended the subsidies to strengthen the press's role in the newborn republic, as Geoffrey Cowan and David Westphal of the University of Southern California describe in their paper, "Public Policy and Funding the News." In today's dollars, mail subsidies provided \$2 billion annually to magazines and newspapers at their peak in 1970. They have declined as the postal service has struggled with deficits, but they remain important to the economics of magazines.

Laws passed by state and local governments requiring the publication of legal notices in newspapers have generated hundreds of millions of dollars in additional annual subsidies to journalism. The adamantly free-market *Wall Street Journal* has a contract with the federal government to print seized-property notices; measured by column inches, the government was the *Journal's* top advertiser in a four-week study conducted by Cowan and Westphal. Should we be bemused, given the ardently anti-government philosophy of the *Journal's* editorial page? Not unduly; the First Amendment protects hypocritical speech, too.

The question we should focus on is whether, in this time of economic shocks and technological change, the intent of Congress to address the public interest through all these existing policies is being adequately met.

ONE OBVIOUS PLACE FOR YOU TO BEGIN IS WITH THOSE FORMAL "public interest obligations" undertaken by broadcasters in exchange for their operating licenses. In theory, radio and television stations must demonstrate a commitment to public issues as a condition for FCC license renewal. The stations report in quarterly filings about their performance. In reality, that tradeoff has devolved into something of a farce.

One might think that since your office is at the FCC, Steve, you could go downstairs to some whirring electronic archive and peruse the "P.I.O." filings, as they are known (P.I.O. stands for "public-interest obligations") to see how your licensees are doing. As you probably know, however, the P.I.O. rules have been so watered down by special interest lobbyists that stations do not have to actually file their public inter-

---

**We don't need more paperwork; we need a new bargain to spur news innovation.**

est reports with anyone but themselves, as long as they are available to the public during office hours.

A group of researchers led by my colleague Tom Glaisyer recently collected and reviewed filings in several cities, to sample the health of the public interest regime. Here in Washington, they wandered over to WUSA 9, a CBS affiliate with a not-bad record of local news broadcasting. In a recent quarterly report, WUSA's staff dutifully listed its contribu-

tions to the public interest. On the public issue of "Child Abuse," for example, on April 27, 2010, the station broadcast, for two minutes, the following story:

Authorities say Janay Morgan Majors shot and killed her husband.... It happened inside the couple's home on Lanes Corner Road in Spotsylvania County.... 'She did call and said, 'I shot my husband,' Lieutenant James Bibens told 9 News Now....

After that Public Interest Report comes another on the issue of "Domestic Abuse." The date of that story is listed as June 18, 2010. The story begins: "Authorities say Janay Morgan Majors shot and killed her husband...." The text is identical to that illuminating Child Abuse.

Pity the poor junior staff members who must waste time and paper on this charade at WUSA and hundreds of other stations. Nor are the WUSA public interest filings exceptionally bad; they are typical. The very existence of such a Dickensian system of busywork and evasion is a symptom of how broken the public interest component of our inherited federal media policy regime has become. I hope your report will seize the opportunity to delve into this travesty.

And there should be specific opportunities for reform at the FCC in this area. I'm thinking of a prospective deal, for example, in which broadcasters could be relieved of these costly sham filings in exchange for spectrum user fees that would add funding to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which is purpose-built to serve the public interest in ways that licensed commercial broadcasters obviously are not. The National Association of Broadcasters estimates that stations spend \$7 billion annually by donating airtime to support their public interest obligations, a figure that does not include the cost of paperwork filings; even 10 percent of that amount, redirected to the CPB, could remake public media in the United States.

No doubt you and your FCC colleagues can think through the details of such a reform better than I can on the outside, but there is a larger point here. To reconstruct our inherited media policy regime so that it is more responsive to the times in which we live, it will be necessary to re-think the public interest obligation. We don't need a better system of paperwork and filings; we need a new bargain that spurs the funding of innovation and journalism in the public interest, the kind that commercial journalism may no longer be able to fully support.

What we've learned from the sham filings we have now, it seems to me, is that trying to force profit-seeking licensees to tack public interest work onto their commercial enterprises is for the most part a fool's errand. It would be far more rational to let commercial enterprises respond to market incentives as they see fit, while leaving the construction of public interest journalism to organizations and leaders who want to do nothing else.

THE PUBLIC INTEREST OBLIGATION SYSTEM HAS BEEN deteriorating for years, while only a handful of policy wonks paid attention. The context in which this embarrassment has

been perpetuated has changed, however. That, too, should galvanize the FCC's attention.

Professional journalism is being gutted in the United States. Newspaper revenues from advertising have fallen by almost half since 2000, according to the Federal Trade Commission's staff report. Newspaper owners have responded to the decline in revenue by reducing costs, primarily by firing staff, shrinking the amount of column inches devoted to news, and shuttering bureaus and beats. Broadcast network news organizations, too, are implementing buyouts, layoffs, and bureau closings. Newspapers and broadcasters brought some of this pain on themselves, by failing to innovate and ignoring their customers. But to suggest that the evisceration of professional newsrooms today is a consequence of a failure of business leadership, rather than technological change, is like saying that Americans would be riding more horses today if only early twentieth century stable owners had been more foresighted.

The online divisions of newspapers and broadcasters are experimenting vigorously with new paywall and advertising models that they hope will replace a significant amount of the lost revenues from the old business models. Let's hope they succeed. However, as the FTC staff noted:

There are reasons for concern that experimentation may not produce a robust and sustainable business model for commercial journalism. History in the United States shows that readers of the news have never paid anywhere close to the full cost of providing the news. Rather, journalism has always been subsidized to a large extent by, for example, the federal government, political parties, or advertising.

It would be possible to argue, as our friends at the Cato Institute and other free-market or libertarian organizations surely would, that the old postal subsidies were an error, even though George Washington supported them; that all other forms of direct and indirect government subsidy to journalism were misguided when enacted; and that the best possible policy going forward would be to eliminate all forms of targeted support for journalism in every corner of the federal policy regime. But such arguments are radical and wrong.

Commercial licensees are making profits from scarce public resources, the airwaves; they must compensate the public for their access, just as resource companies do when they mine ore or cut trees in public parks. Moreover, as the Founders envisioned, freedom of the press and a healthy public square are vital to the republic—so vital that their pursuit is worthy of modest, content-neutral public investments in what is otherwise an overwhelmingly free-market system.

As has been pointed out many times in this magazine, professional reporting that bears witness to complex events and seeks to hold government and corporate power to account is expensive to produce. To do it well requires more training than is typically needed to hold a real estate license but less than is needed to perform brain surgery. To do it well over time, under periodic pressure from powerful opponents, requires resources, experience, and the contextual influence of professional norms and peer review.

As with medicine, law, and accounting, the evolution of

journalism into a profession during the late twentieth century provided no guarantees against fraud or systemic failure, but it did bring with it an overall improvement in civic information and discourse, in comparison to the pre-professional days of tabloid murder sheets, extortionists with flash cameras, and heavily politicized muckrakers.

Still, to emphasize the enduring value of professional journalism does not require that we discount the value of amateurs. There are many who place their journalistic faith in new methodologies accessible by amateurs and enabled by digital technology—"crowdsourcing" to crack complex puzzles or muster public outcry, for example, or data-mining projects conceived by computer programmers, or the spread of citizen-reporters who bear witness to important events around the world with cell phones, without formal training beyond that required to post their clips to YouTube.

When it comes to media policy reform, it is fair for the amateurism optimists (as I think of them) to worry about an inherent bias toward large, professional organizations. This bias has been present, to cite one example, in the regulation of cable franchises at the county and city levels of government backed by federal law. That regime of rules was supposed to seed innovation on subsidized public, educational, and government channels. In many jurisdictions, it hasn't. New policy ideas should be interrogated for biases against small innovators and cleansed of them where possible.

WE DO HAVE RELIABLE EVIDENCE THAT THE PUBLIC CONTINUES TO VALUE MAINSTREAM PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM, HOWEVER, EVEN WHEN SO MANY NEW CHOICES ARE AVAILABLE IN DIGITAL SPACES. For example, the total audience for the best newspaper journalism has grown markedly since 2000, if online readers are taken into account. The audiences for existing public media outlets in the U.S. are also healthy and growing. The country's 365 public television stations have 61 million viewers each week, according to research by Barbara Cochran, the Curtis B. Hurley Chair of Public Affairs Journalism at the Missouri School of Journalism. Public radio has 30 million

---

## We can invest in and reform public media without tax revenue.

listeners. During the last two decades, the total audience for NPR member stations has grown 176 percent, including a 9 percent expansion during the last five years. Altogether, the public broadcasting system reaches 98 percent of the American population. Opinion surveys also show that the public media outlets enjoy considerably higher trust than do their commercial counterparts.

Our public media system has achieved this extraordinary result despite being starved for public funds, in comparison

to other industrialized countries. The U. S. spends about \$1.43 per capita, or \$420 million a year, on public media. Great Britain spends about \$87 per capita. Canada, one of the most miserly among industrialized countries, spends about \$27 per capita. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting's budget has increased less than 5 percent in real terms since 1982.

The U.S. has always taken less government-driven approaches to media policy than other rich countries, and in these fiscally challenged times it is unrealistic to consider increases in funding from the general tax base. But it should be possible to pursue reforms and add funding to public media without making any significant call on general revenues.

The FCC regularly auctions and allocates valuable broadcast spectrum. There should be opportunities to raise considerable funds from spectrum purchasers and users, and to redirect to more productive use the funds they already expend under regulatory mandates such as the P.I.O. system. This search for revenue should also expand beyond FCC licensees to include cable franchisees and satellite broadcasters, among others. Satellite broadcasters, for example, are required to set aside expensive bandwidth for public interest uses, but the impact of these investments is negligible; the equivalent revenue would serve the public better if it were directed to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

What can we achieve with this revenue? For a number of reasons, including political practicality, we should construct reform within the system we already have, rather than invent a new one. That means we should direct all or nearly all of the increased funds we get from public property users and other special interests to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, in return for systemic reforms within the CPB-funded system.

The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 created the CPB. The system was founded to promote the public interest amid pervasive commercial media—precisely the mission we need to revive now. The Corporation has contributed to the success of PBS and NPR. Some of its recent experiments, such as *Argo*, which is intended to fund multimedia local reporting in response to the loss of newspaper jobs, may be promising.

CPB has a record of accountability to Congress and to the public about questions of political bias. Congress has already implemented special funding and governance rules to protect the corporation from politicization—rules that have been reviewed, revised, and argued about for years, but which nonetheless require strengthening. Funding should be removed from the appropriations process to an even greater degree, perhaps by setting up semi-automated flows into an independent trust fund. Governance and appointments to the CPB board must be further depoliticized.

The current CPB is also biased toward mainstream television and radio, particularly television, which receives, by law, three-quarters of its funds. I've heard suggestions that new funding should be linked to more pluralistic formulas, including a restructuring of CPB to encompass new digital entrants, such as ProPublica, for example, or local sites like the nonprofit Voice of San Diego—a change that might be signaled by renaming the entity as the Corporation for Public Media. That may be ambitious politically, but it is certainly

the right strategic direction. Any new funding regime should be measured by whether or not it will produce more serious, independent, diverse, public-minded reporting.

Any new funds routed through a reformed corporation should come with conditions. One should be that that PBS, NPR, and their member stations have incentives to work across digital media, and to embrace local reporting to a much greater degree than they do now (which is not much, overall; only 478 of the 901 stations airing NPR programming

---

## **This is not a matter of left versus right; it concerns the health of civil society.**

have staff of any kind, and only a fraction of those have a local news staff). The stations should also be given incentives to connect their audiences to other non-profit and commercial media outlets through open systems, just as web aggregators do, in order to strengthen innovators and new entrants.

As Bill Kling, the retiring president of American Public Media, has forcefully pointed out, the current CPB-funded radio and television station system is also hobbled by internal problems. Stations are often badly governed. Colleges and universities control many public stations, and their administrations sometimes milk them for cash while neglecting original news and public affairs. Any new funding routed to this system should be linked to a reforms and incentives that will address public media's governance failures.

The system should also be organized to reinforce the existing firewall between government funding and journalism. Such firewalls are a daunting challenge, but they can be managed. Newspaper publishers, in their day, insulated their newsrooms from pressure from advertisers, for the most part; university presidents insulate their faculty from pressure from donors, for the most part. When they fail they are often exposed (typically by journalists) and held accountable. Conflicts of interest and the appearance of conflicts are inherent to professional activity in a free-market economy; law, medicine, accounting, and science all struggle with the problem. There is, in any event, no inherent moral difference between corporate advertising dollars and government dollars; both flow from institutions whose power over citizens journalists should be seeking to describe and challenge.

I've even heard that you, Steve, have thought aloud with colleagues about a rule requiring that no recipient of expanded government funding for public media could receive such funds if the revenue would amount to more than 15 percent of the recipient's total budget. That is a terrific idea, assuming some scheme for grandfathering CPB-funded stations can be put together. In their heyday, newspaper publishers and television networks retained independence in part because revenue sources were diverse and no one category created existential risk.

Funds reallocated to CPB should also be tied to reforms designed to open up the public media system to make it more diverse and more inclusive. Open platforms, open technology, and open access should be guiding aspirations, too. If new funds are passed through CPB, Congress should insist on the creation of at least one new funding stream accessible by outsiders to the legacy PBS and public radio system. The Waldman Fifteen Percent Rule, as we will henceforth think of it, could be particularly helpful in that project.

PBS is a better-than-average but flawed government institution with some outstanding flagship properties, including *Frontline* and *PBS NewsHour* in the journalism space. There are opportunities to use CPB reforms to improve it, although we shouldn't raise our expectations too high. Public radio, on the other hand, which is independently chartered and not beholden to Congress or any other government body, has proven itself as the indispensable center of professional journalism and public affairs programming in the era of shrinking newspapers. Some specific effort should therefore be undertaken to bolster NPR and its member stations, as well as NPR's quasi-rival, American Public Media.

NPR receives less than 2 percent of its annual budget from the CPB or other federal grantmakers. Even when indirect program fees flowing to NPR from member stations are considered, less than 10 percent of CPB's funds flow through to the country's dominant public radio network. The need to raise funds from diverse sources, including listeners, strengthens the NPR system's journalism and other content by forcing it to account for audience preferences and to avoid bias. Even so, more funding routed through CPB to the public radio system would strengthen the country's democracy, particularly if the new funds were tied to incentives to expand the radio system's web publishing and local reporting.

The producers and anchors on public radio should aspire to be the conveners of a reliable, fact-based, calm, inclusive, media space for nonpartisan reporting and debate about the issues that matter, without sensation or the distorting pursuit of commercial reward. Still, like all centrist, successful cultural institutions, public radio will have to challenge its own complacency and raise the level of its diversity. *Saturday Night Live*, we can hope, will continue to help to keep its producers honest. The Alec Baldwin "Schweddy Balls" send-ups of NPR are funny and dead-on. I've been impressed by Vivian Schiller's leadership of NPR, but I thought the decision to fire commentator Juan Williams over the comments he made on Fox News was mistaken. Fox thrives on demagogic identity politics, meanwhile, so it is hardly surprising that it has seized on the firing to stir up Republican resistance to public media.

There is no doubt that conservatives see NPR as hobbled by liberal bias. The network should be accountable to all of its legitimate constituents—to function as a public square, it must be open and fair to all comers. The BBC provides an instructive example: listening to conservative criticism, its managers concluded that their problem was not bias in the way they reported, but an unconscious bias in the subjects they chose. Issues of concern to conservatives, such as immi-

gration and business, were disproportionately neglected. A course correction broadened the BBC's base of support.

AS JOURNALISTS, STEVE, OUR PROFESSION'S CREDIBILITY with the public is, shall we say, limited. Fortunately, the case for a stronger public media need not depend on the opinions of journalists. In addition to civic information, civil debate, and investigations into governmental and corporate performance, a strong public media is becoming essential because technology is rapidly transforming the basic role of media within society and households.

Through television, *Sesame Street* educated a generation of American preschoolers. Through the web and mobile devices, Americans of the future will not just educate their toddlers, they will likely retrain themselves for the workplace; manage their health online; and join scores of virtual communities.

As Bill Kling and others have argued, in the coming world of infinite channels, breathtaking challenges to privacy, and politics that threaten to be as fractured as the media, the country requires a reliable, public-minded virtual square to sort fact from fiction and honest debate from cynically funded manipulation.

That is not a matter of left versus right, or of competition between political parties; it concerns the health of civil society. A campaign to reform and revitalize public media waged to advance such a vision will have many constituents: rural states left out of the urban media cacophony; independent voters and engaged citizens searching for reason and cross-checked facts, as well as in-depth reporting that will hold power to account; diverse community and ethnic groups seeking more inclusive sources of information; educators and public health institutions seeking reliable channels of public-minded reporting about subjects too often neglected; and politicians of all ideological stripes whose careers are unreasonably endangered by undisciplined, self-interested electronic publishers.

That is perhaps much more ambition and abstraction than a civil servant laboring in a cramped Washington cubicle should have to take on board, Steve, but you've always been one to think big. I'm confident that your report will be intelligent, thorough, balanced, and nuanced. I hope it will also provide the most comprehensive blueprint yet for principled but pragmatic reform of our broken media policy regime. "Maybe we're at a 1967 moment, again," Ernest Wilson, the chairman of CPB, likes to say. He is referring to the arrival of the political coalition that gave formal birth to public broadcasting.

He may be right, but only if we connect a unifying reform vision to the broadest possible supporting coalitions. Your work can get us started.

My best regards,  
The Other Steve

CJR

---

STEVE COLL is president of the New America Foundation, a public policy institute based in Washington, and is the author of six nonfiction books. He is a regular contributor to *The New Yorker* and previously worked for twenty years as a reporter, foreign correspondent, and senior editor at *The Washington Post*.

# The Record Keeper

*Carol Rosenberg owns the Guantánamo beat*

BY DAVID GLENN

*2:55: First prisoner comes off. He is wearing a fluorescent orange jump suit, a shiny turquoise facemask, goggles, similar colored orange socks over white footwear, a brighter orange head cover that appeared to be a knit cap. His hands were manacled in front of him, and he limped. He was frisked and led by at least two Marines to the awaiting bus.*

On January 11, 2002, the first twenty detainees landed at Guantánamo Bay Naval Base. Their arrival was witnessed by a cluster of journalists who stood on a hill 400 yards from the runway. One of them was Carol Rosenberg, a military-affairs reporter for *The Miami Herald*. She helped write the pool report quoted above. ¶ The Pentagon hadn't wanted coverage of the prisoners' arrival. The previous day, a small planeload of reporters had been

given a tour of the just-completed detention facility, with the understanding that they'd leave by sundown. But when the group realized that the first prisoners were already en route, Bob Franken of CNN refused to get on the outbound plane. The standoff ended with a compromise: half the journalists would be allowed to stay and write pool reports. No photography allowed.

As Rosenberg watched the detainees being led onto the tarmac, the import of the no-photography rule began to sink in. The Guantánamo prison site had been chosen in part because it was out of public view. Unlike almost every other story on the planet, this one would not be told primarily through images. She and her colleagues would have special responsibilities here. "It was a moment that every print reporter sort of yearns for," Rosenberg says. "What we write is what the world will see."

Eight and a half years later, in the summer of 2010, Rosen-

berg is sitting at a picnic table outside an aging hangar that has been converted into Guantánamo's media operations center. In the early evening, reporters gather at this table to play cards and let off steam. It's a lively, disputatious crew, but on questions of Guantánamo history, policy, and etiquette, Rosenberg receives a bit more deference than anyone else, because she has spent more hours on the base since 2002 than any other journalist.

She may, in fact, have outlasted every soldier, interrogator, and lawyer at Guantánamo. The base's military personnel have turned over several times. Hundreds of prisoners have come and gone. But Rosenberg is still here. As much as any single person, she has been the keeper of the record of what has been one of the most controversial chapters in America's response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11: the government's experiment in detention-without-trial for the hundreds of men scooped up around the world for their alleged connections to al-Qaeda and other U.S. enemies.

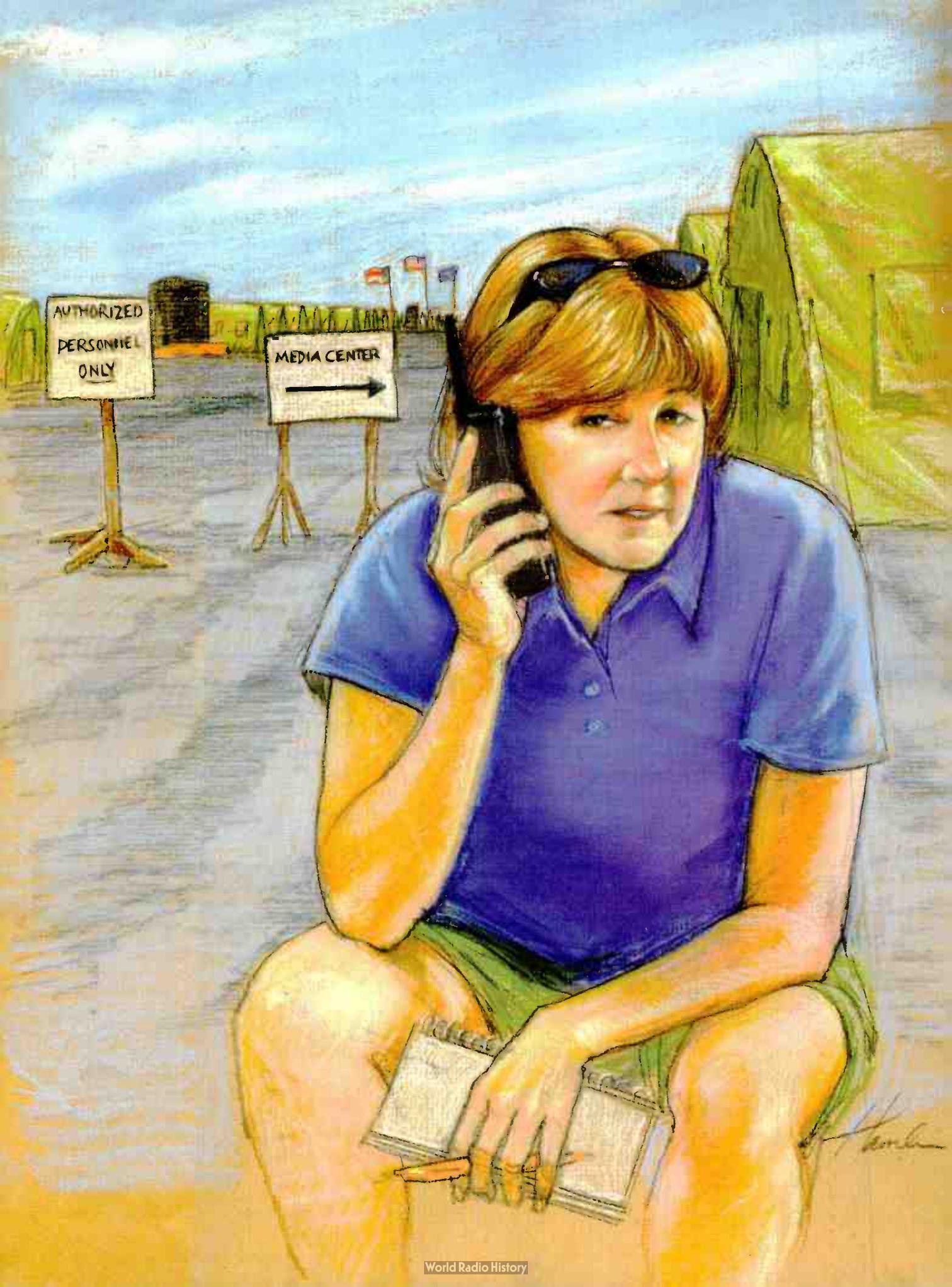
"Carol's daily accounts are what you need to read to understand Guantánamo 101," says Karen Greenberg, executive director of New York University's Center on Law and Security and the author of *The Least Worst Place: Guantánamo's First 100 Days*. "She's still the only person who can contextualize what's going on. Carol has been the consistent presence."

"Daily accounts" is the operative term here. Rosenberg's corpus of writing on Guantánamo consists of hundreds of dispatches, few of them longer than 1,000 words. She rarely writes sweeping

news analyses. She has not written a book about Guantánamo, and says she won't even consider such a project until the detention center closes.

Instead, she has approached her work very much as a beat reporter. Sometimes that has meant covering breaking news about hunger strikes and suicides. Sometimes it has meant short features about the psychiatrists who help the camp guards with stress, or the minor celebrities who visit to perform for the troops. In recent years, it has often meant incremental stories about the proceedings of Guantánamo's military commissions—the fledgling system under which certain detainees are being tried for violations of the laws of war.

But Guantánamo is not like most beats—not even most military beats. The basic task of reporting here is something that might have been scripted by Beckett. You spend most of your time thinking about prisoners (174 of them, as of this writing) who are nearby but at the same time out of



reach. You rarely see them at close range, and you can never speak with them. The military's guidelines for reporters are eternally in flux. Are trial documents made available to journalists covering the military commissions? Some weeks yes, some weeks no. If your photograph of the courthouse accidentally includes a smidgen of the structure next door, which isn't permitted to be described, will the public-affairs officers force you to delete that image? Some weeks yes, some weeks no. Rosenberg's time here has involved a long line of grinding, low-level conflicts about questions like those.

Twice in the last eighteen months, those conflicts boiled over into something bigger. In each case, it seemed possible that Rosenberg's tenure at Guantánamo might come to an end. In the summer of 2009, a Pentagon public-affairs official publicly accused Rosenberg of sexual harassment and other unprofessional conduct. Then, in May of this year, Rosenberg and three Canadian reporters were banned from the base—temporarily, as it turned out—for allegedly violating a military commission's protective order.

Those two episodes, as painful as they were, raised Rosenberg's profile. She gave a blistering speech at the National Press Club this summer about media relations at Guantánamo. A few weeks later, the Society of Professional Journalists announced that she would receive its annual First Amendment Award.

"My editor at the *Herald* told me at the end of 2001 to come down here and stay until it's over," Rosenberg says. "It still isn't."

### **A Game of Inches**

On August 7, Rosenberg and thirty-one other reporters assembled at Andrews Air Force Base for a flight to Guantánamo to cover the opening of the military-commission trial of Omar Khadr, a Canadian who was captured after a firefight in Afghanistan in 2002. Khadr has been charged with ambushing and killing a U.S. soldier in violation of the laws of war.

It was Rosenberg's second trip to the base after her ban was lifted in July, and she was not in an acquiescent mood. Before boarding the flight at Andrews, each reporter was asked to sign the usual fourteen-page set of ground rules for covering military commissions. (Sample: "All direct or indirect contact, communication, interviews, photography, videography or other interaction with Cuban or Haitian migrant personnel on Naval Base Guantánamo Bay is expressly prohibited.") But Rosenberg and two of her colleagues—Jess Bravin of *The Wall Street Journal* and Peter Finn of *The Washington Post*—added amendments beneath their signatures. Rosenberg's read: "Without waiving my legal rights."

After a series of phone calls, the verdict came down: those amendments would not be accepted. "We need a clean copy," said Major Tanya Bradsher, the public-affairs official who coordinated the trip. The three reporters complied, but Rosenberg snapped a picture of her rejected version and posted it on her Twitter feed.

This kind of sparring between the press and their military minders defines the beat at Guantánamo. It is a frustrating game of inches.

Several hours after landing in Cuba—after being checked by bomb-sniffing dogs, waiting in line for badges, and riding a ferry across Guantánamo Bay—the reporters were herded into a briefing room. There a genial civilian, Efrain Malave, explained the base's operational security rules: no photographs of the new courtroom complex. No photographs that reveal the layout of the tent city. No photographs of radar installations or guard towers. All photographs and video will be reviewed at the end of each day.

Then Brad Fagan, the commander of the public-affairs unit for the task force that operates the detention center, had something to add. "I want to clarify this point about doodling in the courtroom," he said. "That is not forbidden, and it has never been forbidden. What you can't do is sketch the courtroom."

Later, several reporters returned to the media center to file curtain-raising stories in advance of Khadr's trial. In many ways it's a typical pressroom, except for this: the reporters are never alone. There is always at least one public-affairs officer in the room, and sometimes as many as five. And this: there is, effectively, nowhere else on the base where reporters can use the phone. "You can't talk to a source without everyone else in the room hearing it," Rosenberg says. She is quick to add that those aren't the worst oppressions in the world, but she says they're typical of the small things that make reporting from Guantánamo so draining.

Take the business of photo screening. Before the end of each day, reporters are expected to have all material on their cameras screened by public-affairs officers. The screening process takes place in an air-conditioned trailer parked in the middle of the hangar. There are typically two officers available to do the work, which can create serious lines at the end of the day when camera operators want to feed footage back to their newsrooms. If they see images that need to be deleted—say, because they show a detainee's face or a secure facility—they'll ask the reporter to sign a form that lists each file and the reason for deletion. The rule that Rosenberg and others find most vexing is that photos may not include images of the media badges that reporters are required to wear. (The fear, apparently, is that al-Qaeda would find a way to sneak onto the base by replicating those badges.) When attorneys or soldiers give press conferences, everyone hastily stuffs their media badges inside their shirts. Step away from that setting, however, and you'll be in trouble for not displaying your badge.

### **Working the Fringes**

Rosenberg is fifty-one, with shoulder-length hair that she tends to pull tightly back when she's at Guantánamo. In conversation, she has a full toolkit. She can narrow her eyes, raise her chin, and be bulldog-skeptical. She can be warm. She can express open astonishment at some piece of bureaucratic mediocrity or deception, as if she were a fledgling reporter just discovering the ways of officialdom. Often she goes through multiple tones in the course of a single, long sentence: her voice will start off angry or enthusiastic then slowly drop into a husky, world-weary mode. And she can hit those notes without seeming phony or callow or theatrical.

That kind of conversational range probably helps to explain some of her ability to cultivate sources.

At Guantánamo that ability is even more crucial than in most settings, because direct contact with sources is rare. Reporters' movements on the base are heavily stage-managed, and during waking hours they're almost never out of earshot of a public-affairs staff member. Rosenberg has done much of her work here by gaining the trust of attorneys, guards, medical workers, and other personnel—and then finding ways to communicate with them from Florida.

Rosenberg believes, for example, that she was the first reporter to learn that three detainees had committed suicide in June 2006. "Before dawn I got a phone call," she says, "that said three prisoners had hanged themselves simultaneously. It wasn't a person who would have had firsthand knowledge, but I made some calls and it was true. From that point forward I found this person's tips unbelievably accurate."

On the day she got the predawn phone call, Rosenberg had been scheduled to fly to Guantánamo to cover a military-commission hearing. The hearing was canceled, but Rosenberg and Carol Williams of the *Los Angeles Times* called and got permission to fly to Guantánamo anyway. Four days after they landed, however, the Office of the Secretary of Defense ordered them home. It wasn't fair for Rosenberg and Williams to have exclusive access, the office said. Two-dozen other reporters had been scheduled to fly from Washington to cover the military commission, but found themselves stranded when that flight was canceled. Now they were clamoring to get to Guantánamo to cover the suicides' aftermath.

"Of course what I said was, 'Let them all in. Send them all down. I've got an empty bed in my room,'" Rosenberg says. "It was absurd to use that as a reason to force Carol and me to leave."

The decision may have been driven partly by embarrassment. Rear Admiral Harold B. Harris Jr., the naval officer who had just taken command of the base, was being widely ridiculed for describing the suicides as "an act of asymmetric warfare against us." (Rosenberg believes that talking point was developed by the Pentagon and that Harris shouldn't be personally scorned for it.)

"It was a stupid decision to push them out," says Charles Swift, a former military attorney who represented Salim Hamdan in a successful U.S. Supreme Court challenge to the Bush administration's initial, ad hoc system of Guantánamo military tribunals. (After that case, Congress formalized the new system of military commissions.) "It was an absolute effort on the part of the administration to control the news."

In contrast to Iraq and Afghanistan, where Swift believes the military is reasonably sophisticated about the news media, he says the dynamic at Guantánamo has always been crude. "The whole time, it's been the standard press book," he says. "We're here to spin the story to our advantage. And when the story could be bad, what we want is no story. In this case, it's resulted in all kinds of crazy rumors." (In *Harper's* this year, for instance, Scott Horton published a long essay suggesting that the three prisoners were actually killed by guards.) "My client was three cells down," says Swift, "and he believes

---

**'Carol is tough as nails,' says Bob Franken. 'The military sometimes seemed like they wanted us to root for the home team, and Carol never played that game.'**

these were suicides. I had a firsthand source tell me that. But when you don't give reporters any access, I can understand why this raises suspicions with the press and the public."

#### **'We're Going to Talk About That'**

Rosenberg majored in journalism at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where she graduated in 1981. In 1987, she moved to Jerusalem and worked as a stringer for UPI. Three years later, she landed a permanent job on the *Herald's* staff. One of her first major assignments was to cover the Gulf War. At one point during that conflict, the 1st Marine Division barred Rosenberg and *Newsday's* Susan Sachs from covering them in retaliation for asking "rude" questions. She remained in Kuwait, where she covered reconstruction and political reform in the aftermath of the war.

By the late 1990s, she was based in Miami and covering military affairs and Cuban-American relations. But she continued to travel to the Middle East. In December 2001, just weeks before the prison at Guantánamo opened, she covered the aftermath of a suicide-bomb attack in Jerusalem. "That's one thing that drives me crazy about the hate mail I get," she says. "People write to me and say, 'Why don't you have the Guantánamo detainees move into your house, if you're so sympathetic to them.' They think I'm a naïve American who has no real knowledge or experience of terrorism. But that's not true at all."

Rosenberg's *Herald* beat included the Southern Command, the Miami-based nerve center of U.S. military operations in Central and South America. So there was never much question that she would cover Guantánamo. Shortly before Christmas 2001, "I started to hear that they were building space for two thousand prisoners," she says. "So I called up SouthCom and a guy said to me very authoritatively, 'It'll only be a hundred, and they'll be the high values, the worst of the worst.'"

"My expectation was that this was not going to be a long-term thing," says Mark Seibel, who hired Rosenberg at the *Herald* and is now the managing editor of the Washington website of McClatchy, the *Herald's* parent company. "But I sort of jokingly suggested that she should just stay down there. It only cost us ten dollars a day, so it was a great bureau."

In the early months of the detention center, Rosenberg signed up as often as she could for the routine daily tour—the one given to members of Congress and journalists who were visiting briefly. Through those tours, Rosenberg says, she was able to establish rapport with a huge array of personnel: cooks, guards, nurses. Over time, cultivating those sources paid off.

When the Pentagon quietly established a new joint task force to conduct interrogations at Guantánamo, Rosenberg was the first reporter to deduce who its commander must be: Major General Michael E. Dunlavey. From sources on the base, “I had started to hear that there was something going on down at the brig,” Rosenberg says. “And we were hearing that there was a secret intelligence unit, JTF-170. I kept asking Bill Costello, the public-affairs officer, Who are they? Who runs it? And Costello kept saying they were not ready to talk about it. But one day I was down at the airfield and I saw a two-star”—that is, a major-general—“hanging around the lounge. I walked up to him and said, ‘I think you’re the secret commander of JTF-170.’ And Costello appeared with his hand on my elbow and led me away. And I said, ‘Bill, that was him, wasn’t it?’ And Costello said, ‘We’ll work something out.’”

Two years later, in February 2004, Rosenberg was the first reporter to identify and describe Salim Hamdan, who was one of the first detainees slated for trial before the Bush administration’s early military tribunals. She got that story by endlessly calling Swift, Hamdan’s attorney. Swift, who is now in private practice in Seattle, remembers those phone calls vividly. “Carol was not the first journalist to contact me, but she was the first to get an interview, because she pushed,” he says. “I think one of the things that drives Carol is, when you say, ‘I don’t want to tell you that, I don’t want to show you that’—with Carol Rosenberg, she comes right back with, ‘Okay, we’re going to talk about that, and you’re going to show me that.’”

### **‘She’s a Hard-ass’**

During the August visit, Rosenberg’s interactions with Guantánamo’s public-affairs officers seemed mostly cordial, with only occasional flashes of conflict. Her clashes with those officials, she says, have typically been with upper-level representatives from the Secretary of Defense’s office. Her worst relationship by far, according to several accounts, was with Navy Commander Jeffrey (J.D.) Gordon, who preceded Major Bradsher as the Western Hemisphere spokesperson.

In July 2008, Gordon wrote to the *Herald’s* executive editor, Anders Gyllenhaal, to complain about Rosenberg’s conduct. A year later, he sent Gyllenhaal another note, and this one was leaked to the press. He accused Rosenberg of bullying her colleagues and making homophobic comments to him: “Have you ever had a red-hot poker shoved up your ass?” and, “I know you’re hot for your interns and bring them down as your ‘companions,’ but seriously, if I’m going to do their work anyway, what purpose do they serve?”

The *Herald* spoke with more than three-dozen people before releasing a brief statement that exonerated Rosenberg. “It was an unfortunate and sort of a mysterious series

of questions that he raised,” says Gyllenhaal. “We spent a lot of time on it, talked to a lot of people, tried to sort through it, took it seriously. The end result was that his complaint didn’t hold together.”

Rosenberg declined to talk on the record about the incident other than to say, “This was a deliberately manufactured smear from inside the Pentagon, a bid to discredit me with my employer. I didn’t harass anyone.”

Jane Sutton, who covers Guantánamo for Reuters and who is a friend of Rosenberg, says that she found Gordon’s accounts implausible. His letter was “shockingly ridiculous,” Sutton says. “I have known Carol. I’ve been there. I’ve shared a tent with her. I’ve never heard her say anything remotely like that.”

But Gordon has a corroborating witness for at least one of the episodes he described. Captain Kim Kleiman, a member of the Wisconsin Army National Guard who served as a public-affairs officer at Guantánamo during part of 2008, says that she heard Rosenberg ask Gordon the “red-hot poker” question. The comment came, Kleiman says, during a conversation about why a detainee had been sitting on a pillow in court, which led to Rosenberg’s speculating about abuse by guards. “She asked Commander Gordon how it felt, or if he would like it—one of those two, I’m not sure exactly,” Kleiman says. “It seemed to me that if it was a man saying that to a woman, there would have been much more of an outcry. I think Commander Gordon just got tired of comments like that.”

Kleiman adds that she respects Rosenberg, whom she recalls as one of the hardest-working reporters at the base. “We had a lot of wonderful interactions,” Kleiman says. “But then, depending on her mood, she could get a little stressed.”

Gordon retired from the Pentagon in late 2009, and is now a senior fellow at the Center for Security Policy. In an e-mail message, he said that several people gave similar testimony to the *Herald* during its investigation.

Gyllenhaal says that he cannot recall such comments, though he did not personally participate in every part of the investigation. But on the contrary, he says, “We started hearing from all sorts of people unsolicited”—including both reporters and military personnel—“about how wrong this was.”

Bob Franken, who is now a regular contributor to MSNBC, says that he saw Rosenberg get into plenty of arguments with public-affairs officers during the early years of Guantánamo, but he never saw her cross the line into unprofessionalism. “We’re not exactly choirboys,” Franken says. “She’s a hard-ass. She’s tough as nails, as you’re supposed to be. But she doesn’t cut corners. The military sometimes seemed like they only wanted us to offer light color commentary and root for the home team, and Carol never played that game.”

Ten months after Gordon’s letter came a more serious headache. At the beginning of May, Rosenberg was at Guantánamo to cover a pretrial hearing in the case of Omar Khadr, the Canadian accused of killing a U.S. soldier. Khadr was only fifteen years old at the time of the attack; he had been brought to the region by his family, which had extensive ties with several terrorist organizations, including al-Qaeda.

At the May hearing, Khadr's attorneys and the government were arguing about whether Khadr's statements to interrogators would be admissible at trial. His lawyers claim that Khadr was mistreated so badly at Afghanistan's Bagram Air Field, and later at Guantánamo, that his confessions, even those he gave to well-behaved interrogators, should be thrown out under the doctrine of "the fruit of the poisonous tree," a legal metaphor used to describe evidence that has been obtained illegally.

In an article on May 5, 2010, Rosenberg mentioned Joshua Claus, a former U.S. military interrogator who is likely to appear at Khadr's trial—assuming there is not a plea deal. Claus had questioned Khadr at the Bagram detention facility shortly after his capture, and Khadr's lawyers say that Claus terrified their client by giving him some lurid cop-show patter to the effect that he would wind up gang-raped in prison if he didn't cooperate. (In an unrelated case, Claus pleaded guilty in 2005 to mistreating two Bagram detainees who died in custody. He spent five months in prison for that crime.)

The identities of several of the interrogators in the Khadr case, including Claus, had been placed under a protective order by the military-commission judge. During the May hearing, Claus was referred to only as "Interrogator #1." But after Khadr's lawyer mentioned in court that Interrogator #1 had been convicted of abusing prisoners at Bagram, the reporters at the base started Googling and realized that it was likely Claus. That made sense, because in early 2008, Claus had contacted the *Toronto Star's* Michelle Shepherd to give an on-the-record interview about his role in interrogating Khadr.

It was an obvious decision, Rosenberg thought, to use Claus's name, given that he had effectively outed himself in that 2008 interview. Three of her colleagues—Shepherd, Steven Edwards of Canwest News Service, and Paul Koring of *The Globe and Mail*—also mentioned Claus by name in articles on May 5 and 6.

But the Pentagon was not amused. On the afternoon of May 6, Major Bradsher walked into the media hangar to inform the four reporters that they had been permanently banned from covering military-commission proceedings. The conversation happened in public, and there was no immediate chance to appeal. The four reporters left the island the next morning.

They did not go quietly. Their editors immediately filed letters of protest. But the broader fight erupted over the next several weeks, when David Schulz, a prominent First Amendment attorney, placed calls to the legal-affairs staffs at The Associated Press, Reuters, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and Dow Jones. Schulz sent a letter to the Pentagon in the name of all of those organizations, arguing that restrictions on printing public information constituted illegal and unconstitutional prior restraint. On August 2, representatives from those organizations were invited to the Pentagon for an off-the-record meeting.

Bryan Whitman, the principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, says that Claus may have given an interview to the *Star* in 2008, but it was only because of things said inside the Guantánamo hearing room that reporters were able to identify him as "Interrogator #1." If a military court

judge says that witnesses' identities are protected, then reporters should respect that, Whitman says. "The vast majority of reporters down there followed the rules," Whitman says. "They didn't publish the name. Four reporters decided not to."

Be that as it may, the Pentagon announced in early August that it was acceptable for news organizations to use Claus's name. And in September, it issued a new set of ground rules, including a provision that makes clear that reporters may publish information that they legitimately obtained outside of their work at Guantánamo.

## The Beat Goes On

There have been nights when Rosenberg has been the only person sleeping in the media tent city, which can hold as many as fifty-four people. (Less rarely, she has been there with only one or two other reporters: Michael Melia, of The Associated Press, and Jane Sutton.)

Many reporters complain about the tents, but Rosenberg says they have advantages over the old arrangement, where reporters were housed on the leeward side of the island, far from the courtrooms.

If Rosenberg ever feels uncomfortable in the tents, she may have herself to blame. The tent city owes its existence, in part, to a story that Rosenberg broke in November 2006. Thanks to a tip from an officer, she discovered on an obscure government-contracting website that the Pentagon was planning to spend up to \$125 million on a huge facility to support military-commission trials. The complex—which Rosenberg privately refers to as "Commissionsville"—would have included beds for 1,200 people, a dining area for 800, and hotel-style rooms for reporters.

But the project struck some as outlandishly expensive. More troubling, as Rosenberg revealed, the Pentagon had planned to bypass the standard congressional appropriations process by invoking certain post-9/11 emergency powers. Her stories helped provoke an uproar in Washington, and Robert Gates, the freshly nominated Defense Secretary, disowned the project during his testimony before Congress.

On this most unusual of beats, then, Rosenberg has made her bed—figuratively and, in this case, literally. And despite the recent turmoil, and her persistent criticisms of the way the military runs things at Guantánamo, she seems somehow suited to the story. So of course Rosenberg is taking a wait-and-see approach toward the liberalized media ground rules that were recently announced. The Guantánamo press officers who are charged with implementing the rules did not join a September 10 conference call when the new rules were described, as they had been expected to do. And when Rosenberg and nine other reporters next traveled to Guantánamo on September 20, no one there seemed aware at first of the new ground rules. None of that was encouraging.

After the last eighteen months, Rosenberg feels like the beat is unlikely to get more difficult than it has already been. "Every time something happens," she says, "I just seem to stay here longer." **CJR**

---

DAVID GLENN is a staff writer for The Chronicle of Higher Education.

# China's Chess Match

*How the web has empowered the people*

BY HOWARD W. FRENCH

Early in 2003, like millions of other migrants of his generation, Sun Zhigang, a young graphic designer, left central China, where he had attended university, and headed for the country's booming industrial Southeast. His quest: work, and with luck, fortune. ¶ When he entered an Internet café one evening, shortly after his arrival in Guangzhou, he was stopped by police who demanded to see his ID, which he had left behind in his nearby apartment. It

was a costly mistake. The police had just launched a large-scale dragnet of illegal migrants, and as was common at the time for people without papers, he was promptly hauled off to detention.

Three days later, Sun Zhigang's family was informed of his death, which the police claimed had been caused by a heart attack. But the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, a local tabloid that was just establishing itself as a powerful crusading force in the country's news landscape, would not let the story end there. A few weeks later, it ran a two-page spread that put a far more sinister spin on the incident. Citing a confidential autopsy report, its bold headline read: UNIVERSITY GRADUATE, 27, SUDDENLY DIES THREE DAYS AFTER DETENTION ON GUANGZHOU STREET.

Word of Sun's death spread rapidly, so rapidly that what ensued was without precedent in China. Within two hours of the newspaper hitting the street, thousands of people

from around the country had posted angry commentary on Sina.com, China's largest news portal. What would quickly become known nationwide as the "Sun Zhigang case" had begun to go viral.

After its initial scoop, the *Southern Metropolis Daily* was banned from reporting further on the incident, but old-fashioned censorship measures like this would prove too little, too late. Online discussion of the case was already mushrooming, and so was the scope of debate, which began with calls for justice in one particular tragedy but quickly led to far broader demands for legal reforms to put an end to the arbitrary detentions and other abuses routinely suffered by hundreds of thousands of migrant laborers.

In June, with the Sun Zhigang case still the talk of the Internet, Chinese premier Wen Jiabao announced an end to regulations that police had used for two decades to summarily detain paperless migrants in hundreds of detention centers, which were maintained around the country solely for this purpose.

Beijing has never acknowledged the public fury and Internet mobilization around the Sun Zhigang case as the driver of this major reform, but for most of China's Internet-savvy public, the connection was unmistakable.

Looking back, China's Internet era could well be said to have begun with this case. Not literally, of course, since China had been online already for several years. But the outcry over Sun Zhigang's death is widely seen in China nonetheless as the opening act in the age of the "netizen." In a country whose

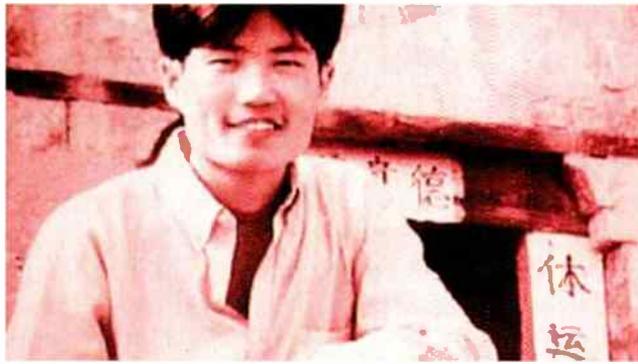
populace has been treated as subjects far more than as citizens throughout its history, the emergence of the Internet as a platform for dramatically freer speech, for edgy popular mobilization, for protest and dissent, has arguably given the Communist Party its most serious challenge in controlling the country's politics since the Tiananmen Square massacre.

At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, it has also given rise to naïve optimism in the West about the transformative power of information technology. Early on, this optimism caused some, including as prominent a figure as Bill Clinton, to predict that the power of the Internet would irrevocably lead to the democratization of China.

Even while they reject views like these as unrealistic, many analysts of Chinese affairs nonetheless see the story of the medium's rise there as one of the most important drivers of change in what all by now recognize as one of the world's fastest-changing societies. They caution, however, that like

China itself today, this story is immensely complex, and is unlikely to conform to the scenarios either of the country's control-obsessed rulers or of those who yearn for a swift democratic transformation of China's politics.

To understand both the power and the limitations of the Internet under a resolutely authoritarian system of gov-



**Martyr** Sun Zhigang's death sparked the age of the netizen.

ernment, it helps to fast-forward from 2003 and the Sun Zhigang case to 2009, to a case that would become just as celebrated as that of the dead migrant worker: the story of Deng Yujiao, a twenty-one-year-old hotel waitress from Hubei Province.

The hotel where Deng worked doubled as one of this increasingly freewheeling country's countless one-stop spas that offer everything from traditional karaoke, hot baths, and haircuts, to massage and a full menu of sexual services.

When a local Communist Party official who was entertaining friends at the spa took a liking to Deng and demanded sex with her, she refused and was assaulted. Rather than give in to the man's demands, Deng fought back with a pedicure knife and stabbed her assailant, killing the official and injuring one of his friends. She then called the police herself and calmly awaited their arrival.

Word of the incident traveled fast, initially following much the same pattern as the Sun Zhigang killing, with newspapers picking up the story and local propaganda officials banning further coverage, only to see the news spread like wildfire on the Internet.

Many analysts say the matter might have gradually tapered off and disappeared were it not for what has come to be seen as a signal act in the emergence of an important new force in online activism: the investigative blogger.

Raising money online to conduct his own investigation, a blogger who goes by the name "Tu Fu" made his way into the mental institution where Deng Yujiao had been confined. His photographs of Deng strapped to a bed are widely credited with redoubling public outrage over her treatment.

Huge numbers of what are now universally known here as *wang min*, or netizens, proclaimed their support for the young woman, demanded that murder charges against her be dropped, and in some cases urged a crackdown on the sex industry or greater protection for its many workers.

Almost overnight, Deng Yujiao became a national figure,

and a hero to many. A slogan popular among many women proclaimed: "Anyone could become a Deng Yujiao."

As with the Sun Zhigang case, with the ever-sensitive anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre fast approaching, Beijing tried to quash news and discussion of the official's killing and its aftermath. "Hubei's case concerning Deng Yujiao has been under judicial investigation in accordance with the law, and news organizations should halt following up the case temporarily and call back journalists working in Hubei immediately," read an order issued by the central government's propaganda authorities a little over two weeks after the incident.

Soon afterward, though, the murder charges against the waitress were downgraded, and Deng, though convicted of the lesser charge of excessive force, was freed. Once again, there would be no government acknowledgment of the role of public opinion, but for millions of Chinese people the impact of the outcry on the web was again unmistakable. "Netizens and other grass-roots forces in cases like Deng Yujiao's are particularly effective in reaching the masses when the government suffers a credibility crisis," said Tu Fu, whose real name is Wu Gan, in an interview with the *South China Morning Post*. "The government is supposed to do what the public expects them to do, and we only hope they do better. The problem is that there never used to be a proper channel or platform for communication, and now the Internet can serve that purpose."

A GREAT DEAL CHANGED IN CHINA BETWEEN SUN ZHIGANG and Deng Yujiao. Most notably, the number of regular Internet users had risen to over 300 million from less than 70 million. The use of advanced mobile phones, often capable of surfing the web at high speeds, had also grown in parallel leaps and bounds, becoming nearly universal in the country's increasingly affluent big cities.

Along with these developments, a new generation of savvy, highly networked Chinese came of age. Very often, they were no longer content to use these new technologies for the simple voicing of opinions. More and more, China's netizens were coming together to press demands for justice and meaningful change.

The resourceful ways that Chinese netizens have responded to the social injustices that surround them and to the limitations of their country's carefully censored press, and indeed the sheer pace of change in this world, highlight one of the fundamental complexities of characterizing the situation of expression in China. For instance, it is becoming ever clearer that China's online community is providing a more robust example of the full potential and sheer relevance of what we call the "citizen journalist" than exists in many rich, liberal societies. This, despite the fact of determined, even stern political control of the press that is often emphasized in the West.

In the space of a few weeks, Deng Yujiao became perhaps the most vivid illustration of this trend, and arguably its greatest beneficiary. Where Sun Zhigang had already died before the public ever became aware of him, the young hotel waitress was absolved. To be indicted for a crime in China almost always leads to conviction, and historically there have been few surer

routes to execution than to be accused of murdering a Communist Party official. With the loud backing of her online supporters, though, Deng had proverbially beaten city hall.

And yet examined more carefully, the era between these two prominent cases—or what might be seen as act one in an unfolding online power struggle between citizen and state—has been far from one of unmitigated gains for the public. This can be seen both in the nature of the two cases themselves, and in a host of steps the Chinese government has taken to try to stay ahead of the game and to cede as little ground as possible to online activism.

While the Sun Zhigang case appears to have forced the state's hand in introducing a major legal reform involving migrant labor, by comparison, in retrospect, the Deng Yujiao case looks more like an emotionally satisfying one-off with little in the way of weighty political resonance. “When it comes to the rights of people who are advocating systemic change, or who are engaging in extremely unpopular speech, or who are expressing certain religious views, or speaking about the independence of this or that place, these people have no more rights than they did ten years ago,” says Rebecca



**Saved** Deng Yujiao in the asylum, top, and with her mother after a national outcry forced officials to drop the charges.

MacKinnon, a senior fellow at the New America Foundation. “Deng Yujiao shows the small stuff may have changed, but the big stuff, absolutely not.”

Although often ham-handed and sometimes subject to tactical about-faces, government tactics include forcing smart-phone users to submit to real-name registration, making anonymous speech difficult, and the insertion of monitoring devices and software into computers and into network gear. And while it is clear that Beijing does not wish to see

a proliferation even of simple, narrow cases like these, Chinese authorities have demonstrated a remarkable capacity for learning lessons from major online incidents, and for responding with tactical flexibility. This includes measures, collectively known as the “soft-management approach,” that range from offering hush money to get people to take their complaints offline to paying web users to toe a pro-government line in order to steer debate.

From time to time, propaganda authorities even issue progressive-sounding rhetoric about the utility of the Internet (and other media) as vehicles for “supervising” governing authorities, and keeping them on the straight and narrow. Rhetoric like this can sound remarkably similar to talk in the United States about the role of a Fourth Estate, but what the propaganda authorities have in mind is a Fourth Estate with uniquely Chinese characteristics. In Beijing's iteration, freer Internet speech and online activism can be useful tools in checking excessive corruption and official abuses of power, under the right circumstances. As such, they may even paradoxically reinforce the legitimacy of the authoritarian state.

Early last year, for example, the death in detention of a peasant in southwestern Yunnan Province sparked an Internet furor that threatened to take on similar proportions to the Sun Zhigang case. In a tactic that is becoming increasingly common, provincial officials launched an online appeal for netizens to help investigate the case. Officials eventually invited several netizens, including some of the most vociferous online critics of the police, to tour the detention center and speak with the warden. This would-be display of openness was played up heavily in the press and the bloggers eventually released a report saying they knew too little to place blame squarely on the police, quickly taking the wind out of the Internet campaign around the incident.

At the same time, Beijing frequently exercises the right to step in aggressively whenever an Internet campaign becomes too popular or too outspoken, or touches on matters deemed too sensitive. Lines are drawn firmly around certain topics: Tibet, Taiwan, and Tiananmen have long been on the list. Similarly, petitioning or criticism of local governments is sometimes tolerated, while criticism of the central government, its politics and personalities, remains strictly and energetically policed.

“The Sun Zhigang case represents the start of a Chinese, Internet-based civil society,” says Yong Hu, a professor at Peking University who is widely regarded as one of the country's leading authorities on the web. “The Chinese government became aware of this incident's symbolic importance and has used its power to influence the course of the Internet. Since then, there has never been such an effective case of Chinese citizen solidarity, and some believe this is a result of the government working very hard to make sure that Internet movements don't take on a more continuous presence.”

Zheng Yongnian, a political scientist at the National University of Singapore who specializes in the Chinese Internet, says that Beijing has demonstrated an impressive capacity for adaptation, having started out from a position where the Internet was largely seen as mainly a political liability and evolving to a position today where it is increasingly seen as

an important tool of government. “In the West, people in the scholarly community associate the Internet with democracy,” he says. “But one should never underestimate the ability of this government to absorb this technology.”

For all of the government’s success in preventing challenges to the system, others say that the very ecology of the Internet has changed greatly since the Sun case in ways that will dramatically raise the stakes for the government. In parallel, many of these analysts say that Chinese society is itself evolving rapidly in ways that favor greater outspokenness on the part of its citizens, and much greater interaction and social organization. Combined with the fast-shifting technological landscape, these trends have made sensational incidents on the Internet both more frequent and increasingly difficult to predict. “The Sun case was in the web 1.0 era, in which the government only needed to control portals and bulletin boards,” says Yong. “Since then, we have entered the 2.0 era, with a proliferation of blogs, with social media, and with SMS [text messaging]. These are a lot harder to control and it is difficult to say who will be successful in the future. That’s the big question mark.”

By 2006, blogs had come into their own in China, spreading rapidly and becoming an important part of the business model of the country’s huge Internet portals, or web hosting firms, companies like Sina.com, Sohu, and Netease. Suddenly, a control-obsessed state was faced not only with a popular new means for the dissemination of news, but equally important, an unprecedented platform for the emergence of independent opinion leaders. Typically, these are bloggers who build large followings and become trusted because of their perceived expertise in a given area, or because of their knack for countering the prevailing, government-driven narrative.

China’s most prominent blogging opinion leader is Han Han, a twenty-eight-year-old high-school dropout from Shanghai with movie star looks and a habit of posing witty and trenchant challenges to authority. Ai Weiwei, another hugely popular blogger and one of China’s most prominent and politically engaged artists, recently compared Han Han with the country’s most totemic author of the twentieth century. “Han is more influential than Lu Xun,” he told the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post*, “because his writing can reach more people.”

Given the size of China’s online audience, which is roughly 400 million and still rising fast, Han Han could also be the world’s most popular blogger—his 425 million cumulative hits place him at the top of Sina.com’s rankings.

At his best, Han Han’s posts operate at a level of sly and wicked subversion, if not of the law then of China’s often oppressive conventions in social and political thought, and especially of the government line. One of the best recent examples of this has come in the mounting dispute that has pitted China against Japan over the question of the ownership of the Diaoyu Islands, a tiny cluster in the East China Sea, following the arrest by the Japanese Coast Guard of a Chinese fishing-boat captain.

Beijing has played a complicated hand in the matter, ardently fanning the embers of nationalism in the state-controlled press, while carefully censoring Internet discussion of



**Top blog** Han Han is an irreverent thorn in Beijing’s side.

the issue with an eye toward preventing big demonstrations in the streets and other mass mobilization, which the state fears could get out of control.

With the crisis with Japan deepening, Han Han mercilessly probed the contradictions in the government’s position while warning his followers of the dangers of manipulation by the state. “In my opinion, if everyone and everything is doing well, life is as one wishes, the wife, kids, home, car, work, leisure, health, all are okay, one can, under the guise of national sentiment, go and make a fuss about protecting the Diaoyu Islands. But if you have something of your own that you haven’t protected, first protect that and then we can talk. Don’t worry about something so far off.”

To those who decide to protest anyway, he continued: “Don’t be surprised when after the battle, you, mortally injured, see the leaders and the invaders [the Japanese] cheerfully discussing a big business deal.”

THE IMPACT OF THE RISE OF BLOGS IS EVIDENT IN THE spate of big, Internet-driven stories that has regularly rocked China beginning in 2007. If it’s true that none of them forced the hand of the central government on a politically sensitive matter like migrant labor, each dominated the national conversation for a time and either resulted in important local changes or broke new ground in terms of the Internet’s ability to feed public skepticism toward the state.

In the first of these cases, in March 2007, a couple residing in the former wartime capital, Chongqing, refused to allow their home to be demolished to make way for a big mall construction project. They held out even as all of their neighbors accepted modest compensation from the city and the land surrounding them was excavated, leaving their home perched atop a thimble-like nub of reddish earth.

Although initially written about in the traditional Chinese media and in the international press, including a piece I filed from Chongqing for *The New York Times*, the case became a national sensation online, where the couple’s home became known as the “nail house,” because of the way it stuck out, and through the web discussions of the couple’s struggle against the city became an important element in a growing movement centered on what in China is still a recent phenomenon: property ownership.

Eventually, the nail-house couple won a far more generous compensation offer, but more significantly, their resistance inspired countless copycats.

Barely a month later, another huge story with important social implications spread via the Internet, when a TV reporter from Henan Province, acting on a tip, visited Shanxi Province and confirmed the use of kidnapped children as juvenile slave labor in the region's primitive brick-kiln industry. This scoop reflects a longstanding pattern in Chinese reporting, an end-run around local censorship, where reporters from another province will break the most sensitive news in a given place, confident that local propaganda authorities have no control over them.

Local authorities initially denied the existence of such a practice, but word of the scoop by the reporter, Fu Zhenzhong, spread far and fast via the Internet, leading thousands of parents to demand the government's help in recovering their missing children. And amid an outraged national Internet discussion, this clamor fueled a fierce competition among news organizations to investigate the industry. Eventually, over 550 minors were rescued from the kilns and many of the operations were forced to shut down.

The third major item thrust on the public agenda by the Internet that spring involved plans to construct a large chemical factory specializing in pesticide-related compounds in the city of Xiamen. Citizen awareness of the project spread via the Internet, and spurred a vehement opposition. Before long, the city was forced to reconsider its plans, and the project was eventually shifted to a rural location far from the city. Many see the online activism around the Xiamen pesticide project as a major milestone in the brief history of not-in-my-backyard politics in China. "Basically, no one understands well how messages like these spread and how a topic goes viral," says Guobin Yang, a Barnard College professor and author of *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*. "What is certain is that everyone is paying attention to this right now, starting with the government."

Yang says that it is widely rumored among specialists in China that Beijing spends as much on online censorship, Internet monitoring of public opinion, and devising ways to control and defuse web-driven protest and dissent as it spends on the military. "No one knows how much money goes into Internet control," he says, "but whatever the sum, it is certainly a lot."

For all of the lavish expenditure and elaborate precautions, the Internet's tendency to catch the government off guard is seemingly undiminished. The most recent explosion of more or less spontaneous public opinion that caught the authorities by surprise occurred in late summer when citizens throughout China began rejecting the government's drive to immunize over 100 million infants against measles.

For years, China has endured serious food and medicine safety scandals, and despite the prevalence of measles, which can be deadly, word spread quickly via the Internet—with no readily apparent basis in fact—that the new vaccine was unsafe and that the government should not be trusted to vaccinate millions of children.

If no one knows the precise mechanisms behind an issue going viral on the Internet, the vaccination crisis was a powerful reminder of one of the most common factors: a deep vein of skepticism toward the authorities. In many instances this skepticism, or even cynicism, toward the government feeds a protest reflex that in a hyper-networked world can very quickly take on political overtones.

The best recent example of this is a series of push-backs by players of online games, which are hugely popular in China, especially one known as *World of Warcraft*. Last year, the state's attempt to impose changes on the game, including the reduction of violent images and measures intended to combat obsessive Internet use, sparked an enormous and prolonged outcry by the game's fans. They committed virtual suicide online in mass protest, and produced a multi-part online video denouncing censorship.

"The gaming community, politically, was the last thing that people were worried about," says Xiao Qiang, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley's School of Journalism and director of China Digital Times, a widely followed website that analyzes online developments in China. "But the people who are playing games are some of the people who are most involved in online chatting, and so this starts a wave of discussion with lots of political edge to it, and ends with a video whose final shot is a freedom bell ringing, along with the warning: 'Don't think our voice is small.'"

LOTS OF ANALYSTS ARE KEENLY EXAMINING THIS SAME PICTURE and coming to starkly divergent conclusions. "There is a role for the Internet to empower civil society," says Singapore University's Zheng. "Civil society is able to do many things. But I don't think that the Internet can democratize China. That is asking too much. By the same token, the government will never again be able to maintain total control."

"I would like to be more optimistic, but there is plenty of evidence we are headed not toward democratization, but toward prolonged authoritarianism," says Rebecca MacKinnon.

By contrast, Qiang draws a far more positive conclusion. "We have entered into a dynamic situation, with the government forced to adapt and to explain itself all the time," he said. "We are seeing the emergence of a new kind of online culture, and it is pushing for a more democratic society and stands in opposition to the state's hegemony. It even has leaders, in people like Han Han and Ai Weiwei, and for now at least, the authorities don't seem to be able to do anything about it."

Democracy may be too big a short- or even medium-term expectation for China, even with its burgeoning Internet culture. But from my perspective as a longtime observer of this country, if China's civil society is the key factor in the country's evolution toward a future in which the Communist Party must accept greater limits to its power, the Internet is this evolution's beating heart. **CJR**

---

HOWARD W. FRENCH is an associate professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. From 2003 to 2008, he was the Shanghai bureau chief of The New York Times. At present, he is a fellow of the Open Society Foundations and is researching a book on China and Africa.

# AOL and Its Algorithm

*The company is hiring hundreds of journalists.  
What will they produce?*

BY LISA ANDERSON

“Are you a passionate and entrepreneurial online journalist? Want to be part of a dynamic and innovative team of journalists, engineers, designers, and business pros who are creating a bold new solution for our industry? Do you think that traditional news media just don’t get it anymore?...” ¶ AOL may have a job for you. Really. In fact, in June AOL pledged to hire as many as 500 journalists over the next year as part of a push to pro-

pel the struggling company from its past as an Internet service provider into a future as a content and advertising company. This is on top of what the company says is 500 full-time journalists already on staff. Lately, the company has been posting hundreds of openings, primarily but not entirely in its fast-expanding Patch.com community news network. Full-time jobs. With benefits and what many might call respectable salaries, for doing what it calls quality work.

But, what kinds of jobs? What kind of journalism? What kind of quality? How does this “bold new solution,” which forges a closer union between journalism and technology, work?

It’s too early to know the answers to those questions. Still, the developing model at AOL—and, on a smaller scale so far, at its rival Yahoo—which recently hired a half-dozen veteran journalists for its new breaking news site called “The Upshot”—represents an aggressive hybrid of editorial skill

and computer algorithms, a combination with the muscle to influence the future of journalism.

Some journalists blanch at the mathematical ring of “algorithm.” They see it as a road to computer-assisted pandering. Proponents argue that an algorithm is simply a software program that can make journalists more successful by telling them what people are interested in. Success, they say, translates to the kind of stories that entice users to click and companies to advertise.

The algorithm developed by AOL, called Demand/ROI, does two main jobs. It scours databases and social networks to discern user interests—through search and other behavioral data. And it monitors how readers are responding to a story or aspect of a website in real-time. In essence, it’s a kind of “most e-mailed list” on steroids—not just reporting on a story’s success, but predicting the degree of success and even how much revenue it might thus generate. This information, obviously, is potentially useful to those assigning and producing content and to those advertising alongside it.

Currently in Beta mode, Demand/ROI is poised to roll out soon for use by AOL News and the rest of AOL’s fifty-plus niche sites, or brands, according to David Mason, AOL’s senior vice president, AOL Content Platform. Demand/ROI is so adept at assessing content “opportunities,” Mason says, that eventually the algorithm may be used to post some basic assignments—automatically—in areas such as Seed.com, AOL’s new professional-amateur site, which offers

low-pay assignments for freelance writers, photographers, and, soon, videographers.

Tim Armstrong, the company’s chairman and chief executive, stresses that the algorithm is a tool to make journalists smarter and their output more relevant, not to be the sole dictator of content. “Technology is not a weapon against journalism, it’s a weapon for journalism,” he says. A tall, lanky man of thirty-nine, Armstrong took the helm at AOL’s sprawling corporate headquarters in lower Manhattan in March 2009. He came from Google, where he oversaw advertising sales, marketing, and operations as president of the company’s Americas Operations.

Armstrong envisions AOL producing good journalism guided by humans and enhanced by machines, a form at once familiar and alien, especially to members of—and refugees from—legacy media. Yet AOL is luring veterans of those newsrooms, along with graduates of top journalism

schools. It hired close to 900 people over the summer, though editorial hiring for the company's chief journalistic brands beyond Patch—such as AOL News, DailyFinance, PoliticsDaily, WalletPop, Engadget, and FanHouse—has slowed somewhat, according to people familiar with AOL. Before that, the company already had signed on dozens of experienced journalists, many with distinguished backgrounds at major news organizations, from *USA Today* and the *San Francisco Examiner* to The Associated Press and *The New York Times*. AOL's corporate site mentions nine employees who have been involved in writing or editing Pulitzer Prize-winning stories.

AOL declines to disclose salary information, but people familiar with the company estimate that some top editors on AOL's leading journalistic sites earn six figures, while some staff writers make \$70,000 or more, depending on their experience or, in the case of columnists, their following. In addition, AOL claims that more than 40,000 "content creators" work across its properties, some on contract and others on a per-assignment basis. Most of these are paid on a much lower level, often under \$100 for an article.

The notion that a company like AOL would claim to be investing in "quality" journalism has created a modicum of hope. At the same time, pessimists worry that the acquisi-

---

**Like Dubai, which is rushing to transform itself before the oil beneath its sands runs out, AOL is trying to develop a new business model before its dial-up screech falls silent.**

tion of such news veterans provides a veneer of credibility for a venture that might wind up essentially akin to "content farms" like Associated Content (recently purchased by Yahoo), Examiner.com, and Demand Media, where armies of low-paid freelancers churn out material in vast quantity and of varying quality on topics driven primarily by algorithms, producing only content that is predicted to attract the most users, and thus, advertisers.

That's not going to happen at AOL, according to Armstrong. "We keep a Chinese wall between our ads and our content," he says, but adds: "Even though there's a Chinese wall, both sides could be looking at that Demand algorithm," and what

each does with that information could be entirely different. Armstrong, who was a co-founder and former chairman of Associated Content, argues that journalistic concerns about AOL's algorithm are understandable but unfounded. The algorithms, he says, are "just helpful data."

He has allies in this view, including Jay Rosen, the press critic and professor of journalism at New York University. Rosen says he understands journalists' fears about them but he argues that if they are not abused, the use of algorithms—"learning what people are clicking on, searching for, and interested in now, today, and tomorrow" can be a good thing.

"Who wouldn't want to know? It's important data and if you treat it as anything but important data, you are making a mistake.... Journalists missed the boat on data a long time ago and that's one of the reasons why they're in the hole they're in," he says. "Think about it: in what other industry in America could you sit there as the most valuable employees in the business and be ignorant about the data?"

LIKE DUBAI, WHICH IS RUSHING TO TRANSFORM ITSELF into a glittering playground of the Middle East before the oil under its sands runs out, AOL is scrambling to develop a new business model before its dial-up screech falls silent and its home page no longer reliably funnels dial-up subscribers to its various sites. Divorced from a rocky, ten-year marriage with Time Warner at the end of 2009, the company is in a race to reinvent itself.

The dial-up business remains lucrative, but is retreating before the march of broadband. Many rural areas of the U.S. don't have broadband service. But in its most recent annual 10-K filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission, AOL acknowledged that this number is rapidly declining: dial-up households dropped from 44 million in 2004 to 10 million in 2009, while broadband penetration in U.S. households rose from 28 percent to 69 percent. The number of AOL's dial-up customers, unsurprisingly, is down to about 5 million, from a peak of 26.7 million in 2002. According to its 10-K filing, the company derived \$1.4 billion in revenue from dial-up in 2009, down from \$1.9 billion in 2008. Advertising revenues also declined, as they have through the first half of 2010.

Armstrong is betting on user-data-guided content to extricate the pioneering twenty-five-year-old tech firm from its "You've Got Mail" dial-up roots and reposition it as a "You've Got My Attention" media company. To do that, he believes that content must reach a level of quantity—and quality—that will appeal not just to users, but to national advertisers. As part of that strategy, AOL is also making acquisitions. In late September it bought the popular TechCrunch blog, along with an online video-instruction company called 5minMedia.

AOL's content flows out through multiple streams, a wide range of niche sites, or brands. Many of these sites—such as Games.com, Love.com, and the country music-oriented The Boot—offer little or no journalism content. Many others feature service journalism, such as KitchenDaily and StyleList, "real style for women who love fashion, beauty, and celebrity."

Experienced journalists are sprinkled throughout these service sites, primarily as editors.

The AOL sites most deeply rooted in journalism, and where many of the journalists hired so far are working, are in the news and information group: broad-based AOL News, which tries to provide national and foreign news and analysis edited by former *New York Times* web journalist Michael Nizza; PoliticsDaily, run by former *Times* journalist Melinda Henneberger; DailyFinance, run by former *BusinessWeek* reporter Amey Stone; Engadget, a popular tech site; WalletPop, on personal finance; and sports-oriented FanHouse, which is crammed with former newspaper sportswriter stars.

Near the other end of the AOL editorial spectrum is Seed.com, run by Saul Hansell, a veteran *New York Times* technology writer and the programming director of AOL Content Platform. On Seed, professional and amateur freelancers choose from a variety of primarily service-oriented assignments generated by editors with assistance from AOL's algorithm. Contributors bid for assignments along the lines of "Best Public Restrooms in Park City, UT"—competing for assignments that pay as little as \$50 for 1,000 words. If a submission is selected for publication, editors then shape the winner's material. The plan is for Seed to generate large amounts of original content—including articles, photos, and videos—for use across AOL brands.

This is the closest AOL currently tilts toward the so-called "content farm" model. Content platform chief David Mason contends that, over time, a stable of trusted contributors will emerge from the fray and some will receive direct assignments. He said payment for projects on Seed will eventually run the gamut from \$10 to more than \$1,000, depending on such variables as the required level of expertise and the complexity of the assignment.

AOL'S MANHATTAN HEADQUARTERS OCCUPIES THREE sprawling floors in the old Wanamaker department store building on lower Broadway. Row upon row of gray cubicles are punctuated by large flat-screen color monitors on the walls. The floors are so cavernous and similar in appearance that color-coded location charts are provided on counters near the elevator banks. Hushed but busy engineers, programmers, designers, and editors work side by side. Brainstorming takes place in quirky seating areas defined by orange and white shower curtains, and most people have at least two computer screens on their desks.

One of them is Cheryl Brown, editorial director of AOL's KitchenDaily, a new recipe-oriented food site for home cooks, and its older Slashfood news blog. Brown spent ten years as an editor at Condé Nast's recently shuttered *Gourmet* magazine, until 2005, and then served as managing editor of Disney's now-defunct parenting magazine *Wondertime* before joining AOL in October 2009, just four months before the launch of KitchenDaily.

After the demise of *Wondertime*, "I decided this was the time to hitch up the wagon and learn some new skills if I were going to stay in this business," says Brown. She manages two full-time and two part-time editorial staffers, along with

a long list of regular contributors, many of them ex-*Gourmet* writers, and nearly a dozen "partnerships" that provide columns and recipes from people like author and *New York*

---

**Brown admits she's become an algorithm addict. She puts up what she calls her 'heat map' on a screen, a program that instantly tells her what's hot and what's not on her two sites.**

*Times* columnist Mark Bittman and outlets like The Culinary Institute of America. "The pace is different," she says. "It's almost like putting out a whole magazine every day, with less staff and fewer resources. So, it's almost blinding whiplash for a little while. But then you kind of get into the groove and figure out how to make it work." A few graying heads can be spotted around the office, but just a few. "It's really young," notes Brown, who is forty-one.

At this point, she said, some 90 percent of the content on KitchenDaily (not counting recipes) is original, plus some licensed reprints. KitchenDaily also ventures beyond the stove. It sent an editor to the White House in June for an exclusive story on harvesting honey from the presidential beehives, including photos, video, an article, and links to honey recipes. The goal is increased engagement with users, measured in clicks, comments, and participation, as in inviting cooks to share food photos through Flickr.

More news-oriented than KitchenDaily, the Slashfood blog publishes such stories as "Wine Vending Machines Debut in Pa.," "Ready Pac Baby Spinach Recall," and features such as "Celebrating Cow Appreciation Day," along with modules on chefs, restaurants, reviews, and items on new beers and other products. KitchenDaily has about fifty regular contributors and SlashFood has eighteen, but Brown can access more original content from different regions of the country for both sites through local Patch editors and assignments posted on Seed.

Brown admits she's become an algorithm addict. She puts up what she calls her "heat map" on a screen, a program that instantly tells her exactly what's hot and what's not on her two sites by tracking where people are clicking.

And she can do something about what she sees. If a feature on asparagus is not pulling in the expected eyeballs, its

headline and deck copy can be changed to increase appeal. If it's determined that a cooking video is more popular at a certain hour, it can be shifted. While it doesn't dictate what they do on the sites, Brown said, the algorithm "helps us focus the content."

AOL's biggest current push into journalism is in Patch, a spreading network of hyper-local community news sites, in which it is investing \$50 million this year. AOL has been posting hundreds of openings for Patch editors across the country, along the lines of: "Journalists wanted. Small town news. Big time job."

Armstrong was one of the initial investors in Patch, which AOL purchased in June 2009 (Armstrong says he recused himself from the negotiations and took back only his initial investment). Focusing on neighborhoods of 15,000 to 50,000 people, Patch news operations emphasize original reporting, whether about the local high school graduation or the city council fight over taxes. There were 100 Patches in nine states by mid-August; at least 400 additional sites in more than a dozen more states are projected by the end of 2010, particularly in areas where local newspapers have pulled up stakes.

Most Patch launches tend to in be middle-class to affluent bedroom communities, where demographics are attractive to local and national advertisers. Perhaps cognizant of that class divide, AOL started the Patch.org Foundation in March 2010 to partner with local organizations in inner-city neighborhoods to fund Patch sites in underserved areas. In September, AOL announced the launch of PatchU, a program in which journalism students at a number of colleges and universities can intern at local Patch sites to get course credit and practical experience. The program, which partners with thirteen major journalism schools, offers hands-on training for students and provides a degree of journalistic credibility to Patch—and a source of free content.

Still, the landscape is littered with failed or gasping hyper-local sites, from independent start-ups like the defunct Backfence and the struggling NewJerseyNewsroom to legacy experiments such as *The Washington Post's* defunct LoudounExtra and *The New York Times's* The Local, which recently shut its three New Jersey sites and pointed readers to Baristanet. Even AOL, in the late 1990s, tested the hyper-local waters with Digital City, a partnership with Tribune Co., and found them too chilly. It was a different model—using reporters employed by Tribune newspapers—and a different time—fewer people had computers, there were no smart phones, and everybody used dial-up. Lack of scale was a problem.

And so was lack of engagement. People had been trained to expect local news to arrive only on a certain day via weekly newspapers, recalls Owen Youngman, then in charge of Tribune's Digital City effort and now the Knight Professor of Digital Media Strategy at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism. Youngman said success will still be a challenge, but if a local online news service can demonstrate comprehensive and continuing coverage of a big story, akin to news radio, he said, it's got an opportunity to grow.

According to people familiar with AOL, local full-time

Patch editors, who range from fresh journalism school graduates to twenty-year-plus veterans, make about \$35,000 to \$50,000. They are the 24/7-foot soldiers and they work hard at cultivating their Patches. Every one gets a Blackberry, laptop, digital still/video camera, and a police scanner to keep them up at night. None of them has an office. They are encouraged to work out of local coffee houses or other public venues where they are supposed to be in touch with their neighbors—and the local news.

Satta Sarmah is the editor of the Patch in suburban Rye, New York (rye.patch.com). Sarmah, twenty-five, interned at CBS News London and the *Columbia Journalism Review*, and then worked at the *Orlando Sentinel*, CNN, and Everyblock.com before joining Patch in November 2009. She got a scoop in June when coyotes attacked and slightly injured two little girls in separate incidents. Rye Patch broke the story of the second attack.

Typically, Sarmah said, she posts her first story between 6 and 8 a.m. and on some days may finish work after a city council meeting ends at midnight. She writes as well as assigns and edits her dozen-odd freelance contributors and manages a weekly budget. She is supervised by the Hudson Valley regional editors, Kathleen Ryan O'Connor and William Demarest. Patch supervisors are said to earn around \$80,000, depending on experience.

On September 11, the Rye Patch news site led with a comprehensive rundown on the fall activities of local youth football, field hockey, soccer, volleyball, tennis, and cross-country sports teams. Also featured were stories about:

---

**A Patch story about a shooting had far less detail and background than a print competitor. Yet due to search-engine optimization, the Patch story outranked the newspaper piece on Google.**

local regulations governing the installation of residential walls and fences, and the intricacies of the "bagel tax" for local coffee shops. Then there were the usual events and announcements.

Patch writing tends to be competent if no-frills. As Ken Doctor pointed out on his blog *Newsonomics*, a Patch story

may give the facts, but often with only a single source and sometimes without much context. He cited a story this summer about a police shootout that resulted in the death of an armed gunman at a 7-11 in San Ramon, California, in which Patch offered nothing but the bare facts. A story about the incident in the local *Contra Costa Times* newspaper, meanwhile, with two bylines, gave much more depth and background. Yet due to adept use of search-engine optimization, the Patch story topped the newspaper story on both Google web and news searches. And, Doctor added, there were nine comments on the Patch story and none on its *Contra Costa* counterpart.

IT IS ON THE BIGGER STAGE—BREAKING NATIONAL AND global news, at its AOL News site—where AOL faces an immediate challenge. Journalists from “legacy” organizations including *The New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *USA Today*, and others are staff members and contributors there. The question is, how to consistently produce quality, original national and foreign news with a full-time staff of about twenty people, heavily skewed toward editors, plus about two-dozen part-time staffers and dozens of freelancers?

By mid-summer, somewhere between one-third and one-half of all the content on the site was original, according to former AOL editor Michael Nizza (Nizza departed for News Corp. in October). The balance was a mix of wire stories, content from partners, such as Space.com, and an often-awkward hybrid of rewritten outside stories with staff reporting added. Stories from AOL News full-time staffers consistently exhibit original in-depth reporting and analysis. But work from the dozens of freelance “contributors” is uneven.

For example, on July 6 a U.S.-based contributor, trying to report on Raoul Moat, a gunman loose in northern England, inadvertently quoted from *The News Grind*, a satirical British news site. The unwitting—but doubtlessly under pressure—contributor included this quote in his AOL News story: “I can scarcely wait for the climax,” confirmed Elsie White, 77, as she raced back to her house after picking up some toffees and copies of today’s paper from a local news agent featuring the blood-soaked face of a police officer allegedly shot by Moat. “We haven’t had a live event like this to enjoy for quite some time and there’s only old ‘Doctors’ episodes on at this time of day.”

*The News Grind* and *The New York Observer* gleefully noted the misstep and a correction swiftly followed. But the incident highlighted the potential danger when reporting is rapidly cobbled together from outside sources. Nizza said AOL News has since formalized a ban on posts based on single sources beyond proven news operations.

Many of these hybrid pieces, sometimes attributing to as many as five different news organizations, are clunky. They’re also vulnerable to errors, as journalists scramble to rearrange quotes and paragraphs during rewriting. This happened, for example, with a June piece on Starbucks offering free Wi-Fi, in which a quote taken from a *New York Times* story was attributed to the wrong person.

It’s not what Armstrong wants AOL News to be, he said.

“I have a hard time seeing an economic long-term value in journalists scraping other journalists and adding 5 percent more to the story. I am not a fan of that. I think it’s not an economic viability and I don’t think it delivers great consumer value.”

---

**‘Our overarching business question is: Is journalism undervalued? ... As Warren Buffett says, “be greedy when people are fearful, and fearful when people are greedy.”’**

But he also acknowledged the challenge AOL News faces. “Patch is very clear journalism. Something like PoliticsDaily is really clear journalism. Engadget and FanHouse, really clear original journalism, and strong,” he says. “Real time breaking news? How do you do that? You can be either the originator or the partner, but probably being in-between is not a good place to be.”

AOL is still working on that conundrum, he said, as well as how best to use the algorithm and its indicators of reader interest and response at AOL News.

This new union of journalism and algorithm is a tricky area that is still evolving. According to Ken Doctor, “No one’s done it right yet. The blend of real journalistic know-how, talent, and experience and the technologies of the day to aid that, and to distribute the work itself—it’s the blend of the two that nobody’s gotten right yet.” Still, he applauded AOL’s effort in trying.

No one, including Tim Armstrong, knows if AOL’s grand plan will work. “Our overarching business question is: Is journalism undervalued?” He continues: “As Warren Buffett says, be greedy when people are fearful, and fearful when people are greedy. We’re being greedy when people are fearful about journalism.”

Of course, he concedes, there may be good reasons to be fearful. “But I have to believe that journalism in the future will be just as important as journalism in the past.” **CJR**

---

LISA ANDERSON, a former CJR *Encore Fellow*, is the consulting editor for women’s rights at *The Thomson Reuters Foundation TrustLaw* site. Her article in the May/June CJR—“Can Local TV News Afford Investigations?”—won a *Front Page Award* this fall from the *Newswomen’s Club of New York*.

# In Demand

*A week inside the future of journalism*

BY NICHOLAS SPANGLER

I spent eight years at *The Miami Herald*, mainly writing features, and when the paper laid me off in 2009, I was humiliated and sad. But people told me getting laid off could be a good thing and I listened to them. “Invent” and “take charge” and “define” are some of the words I remember from those conversations, which left me, in hindsight, manically deluded about my prospects. ¶ I moved to New York, where I’d always wanted to live.

I thought I would polish off a few story ideas and a friend’s idea for a screenplay I’d been toying with (it featured, unwisely, a terminally blocked romance novelist); then, after a suitable period, reinvented and redefined and fully in charge, I would find another job as a reporter.

But the screenplay foundered. The story ideas turned out to be not very good and I could not think of new ones. The well was dry. So I started looking for a job, at first confining my search to New York and Washington. There were reporting jobs of a peculiar sort in these cities, and my cover letters included lines like, “My knowledge of the nuclear power industry is admittedly scant” and “Although I speak no Japanese, I know New York City intimately.”

For a long time I did not come close to any job, and then I found Demand Media, which ran help-wanted ads on JournalismJobs.com and Mediabistro.com. Demand’s own site featured a picture of a laptop on a table in front of a

beachfront tiki bar. Sometimes instead there was a picture of a good-looking woman sitting with her laptop in a comfortable chair. She looked happy. She was beaming. I wanted to look like that.

DEMAND, WHICH LAUNCHED IN 2006, doesn’t do news, which is expensive to produce and perishable. It does “commercial content.” If you’ve watched a how-to video on YouTube or read an instructional article on the web, you’ve probably consumed Demand content. More than 2 million pieces were online by mid-summer, with more than 5,000 new ones appearing every day. In September, Demand attracted nearly 59 million unique visitors, according to comScore, the Internet marketing research firm (Nytimes.com, by comparison, the nation’s top newspaper site, had 33 million), to its company-owned websites like eHow and Livestrong, and more to its 350 client sites, which incorporate some of Demand’s content. Among Demand’s clients are websites operated by *USA Today*, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the *Houston Chronicle*.

Demand and its competitors—there are several, including AOL’s Seed and Yahoo’s Associated Content—rely on algorithms and search data to determine what content consumers are seeking, what content advertisers are willing to pay for, and what content can be profitably produced. There are no news meetings. There are no newsrooms. The editorial workforce is freelance, compensated by the piece, at a rate that varies but is never far from skimpy.

Demand and the specter it represents—what Clay Shirky calls the radical “commodification” of content, without regard to civic value or subjective judgments about quality or any of the other sentimental trappings of the Murrow century—have inspired loathing and awe, but mostly loathing, in the class of people that pays attention to such things. Which is to say, mainly journalists and those who love them. “We’ve got former members writing this stuff,” says Bernie Lunzer, of The Newspaper Guild. “Some are just glad to have work. They’re becoming just a raw commodity bought at the cheapest price and that, essentially, is what Demand stands for. It spells the end of what we consider journalism.”

Or take Ken Doctor, former newspaperman turned news futurist and author of the book *Newsonomics*: “This is the logical extension of a long-time strategy to eke out profits by squeezing labor and overhead costs.”

Most news organizations already use search-engine-optimization strategies to push their content on the web. Within five years, says Doctor, SEO and advanced metrics will play a prominent role in decisions about what to cover and how heavily to cover it, with reporters and stories graded by the number and value of the consumers they attract. "It's a box that, once you look inside, you can't not look," Doctor says.

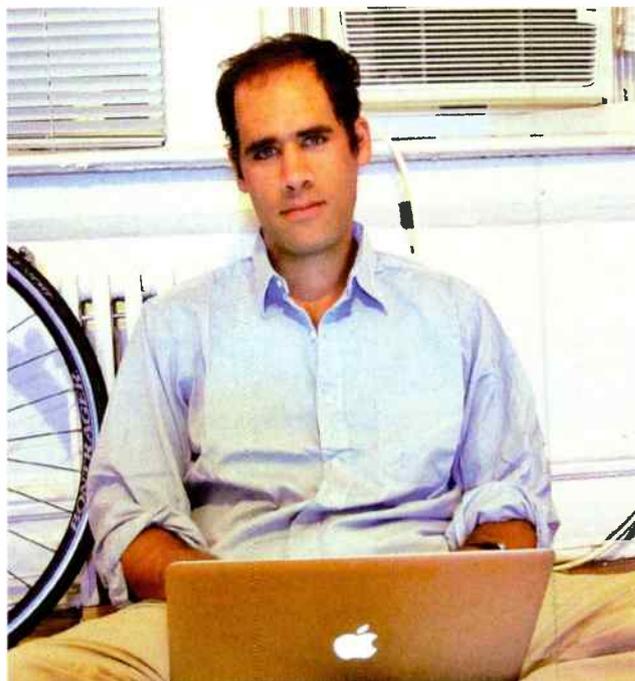
One possible consequence of looking in the box is that news organizations will increasingly turn to companies like Demand for their evergreen content. Quality may suffer, at least initially, but the money news organizations save could be redirected to actual newsgathering, benefiting not just readers but the commonweal. If, in the future, consumers demand higher-quality content from the evergreen material, wages may stabilize for the para-professional workforce producing it, as Demand and others compete for a limited number of skilled content producers.

Or not. Doctor envisions not so much a race to the bottom as a race to mediocrity, the "good-enough" that is all consumers may really want, which would mean the end of most quality journalism and the end of journalism as a middle-class profession.

IN AUGUST, DEMAND FILED WITH THE SECURITIES AND Exchange Commission for an initial public stock offering that could value the company at \$1.5 billion. Forty-five percent of the company's \$198.5 million in revenue in 2009 came from a domain-registry service that is the world's second-largest, with more than 10 million names. Besides the cash it throws off, the registry is a valuable source of information on people's search habits, and a list of potential outlets for Demand content. The other part of that \$198.5 million, the part everyone talks about, came mostly in pennies and fractions of pennies earned on video and search advertising.

For most of its brief existence, Demand has been a money-loser, and it finished 2009 with a \$22 million loss. But its SEC filing contains numbers that would make newspaper executives salivate: every dollar spent on written content in 2008's third quarter, for instance, is projected to return \$1.58.

Demand views its contributor-vetting process as a competitive advantage that separates it from less-discriminating web publishers, and before I could work there I had to submit a writing sample. I chose a story I'd written for the *Herald* about a young Iraq war veteran who came home burned almost beyond recognition only to have his fiancé dump him. A day later I was hired, joining a freelance workforce of 10,000 writers, videographers, and copy editors. My colleagues included Emmy- and Society of Professional Journalism-award winners, according to Demand. They also included, according to a blog Demand set up so its freelancers can tell others about why they loved working there, mechanics who'd always wanted to do creative writing, laid-off sports editors, and one ex-Special Forces soldier/ex-cowboy who likes his new job because he doesn't have to get up "before daylight to go out in sub-zero weather to break ice to water cows that want to kick my head off. Best of all, I don't have to see people." For reasons he didn't go into, this guy was writing under a Scandinavian-sounding alias, but he did say



**Demand for what?** The author has seen the future of journalism, and was not encouraged.

that before finding a home at Demand, he'd written for *Tactical Knives* magazine and various Army field manuals.

Most days there were around 270,000 story topics to choose from, typically paying between \$3 and \$15. In their span and dullness and fascinating particulars, they reflected a more granular portrait of twenty-first-century American interests than the trending search topics on Google or Yahoo ever will. We are not deep in wonder. We are bankrupt and considering divorce in Oklahoma. We want to know how to make money with candy stands at miniature-golf courses. We want do-it-yourself plans for an electric unicycle and for dog wheelchairs. We are curious about Hungarian customs regulations and how to use a spinal-cord monitor during scoliosis surgery. Also, please, we would like instructions on How to Set Up a Pony Ride with No Ponies.

This last one fascinated me. I wondered if many people had run into this problem, or if it were just one person somewhere, some not-very-good dad trying to make it all up to the kids with one great party, already cutting corners.

The pony story, in its weirdness, suggests that there is a point where traditional news organizations, which target to a greater or lesser extent a mass audience with advertising to match, will always fail: that failure to meet the needs of someone, somewhere, is built into their business model. Consider: *The Miami Herald* usually runs a story about the Kentucky Derby. It might also run one about pony-rental businesses in South Florida, and if magazines like *Ponies Illustrated* and *Children's Parties Monthly* existed, they might do something similar. But no publication could afford to devote regular space to topics such as pony rides without ponies. Besides, no writer could conceive of such a story and no editor would assign it, because nobody could anticipate the need.

This is the famous “long tail,” an example of what Shirky calls the “nichification” of the media landscape, unfeasible under the conditions of twentieth-century oligopoly but happening now before our eyes. I am pleased that people’s information needs are being met, but I hope they get met by someone else. The pony koan, along with some stories on strength training for sports, were among the few stories that truly engaged me during my forty hours working for Demand last July.

I was an unhappy camper from the start, when I realized my debut story, about the medicinal uses of the *thuja occidentalis* plant, took three hours to research and write but earned me just \$15. It was possibly wrong, since I spoke to no doctors, and my research consisted largely of sifting through a study sponsored by a German drug company that seemed to have cornered the world market in *thuja* homeopathic remedies. It was also stunningly boring, the sort of writing that would sit comfortably on the side of a medicine bottle, which was exactly the point.

Soon, I began to search for topics that seemed easy and to stint on research. My triumph was a piece on Troy-Bilt lawnmower recalls, completed in about twenty minutes with probably no risk to the consuming public. That piece, like several others I wrote, was flagged for plagiarism by an automated detector whose workings I never understood. I never plagiarized—deliberately or inadvertently—but each time I got a “Flagged” notice I got heart palpitations.

The unpleasantness would be dispelled by the pony story, I hoped. Can a pony ride without a pony exist? It’s the rare metaphysical problem that can be resolved by just renting a pony, and my first draft relied on that strategy, drawing on material from the websites of several pony-rental firms. Several days passed and my draft was returned, with comments from an editor whose name and location I never learned. “I referred this draft to a DS editorial lead given your advice to rent ponies. The title specifies running a ride without a pony, and the editorial lead confirmed this.”

My next draft explored the possibilities of animatronic ponies, equine alternatives to ponies such as small horses, and yaks and dromedaries. From the editor: “Thank you for your efforts, but this article still lacks the authoritative views that would actually recommend hiring a yak (except in Mongolia), llama or a camel. The International Yak website notes all sorts of activities, and riding isn’t among them.”

At Demand, a story gets only two strikes before it is canned; I’d wasted another three hours. My Demand experience, which I conceived of partly as an experiment and partly as a way to make money, was earning me less than minimum wage (for my forty-plus hours, I earned \$360) and revealing little about the particular kind of writing it required, except that I was bad at it. Also, I missed my old job.

I missed the middle-aged guys I used to sit next to, who took me fishing. I missed seeing my stories in print. I even missed my desk. My new one, since a string of heat waves rendered my apartment uninhabitable, was in the worst reading room of the main branch of the Brooklyn Public Library. When I looked up from my laptop to the shelves around me, which was often, I saw titles like *Best Résumés and Letters for Ex-Offenders* and *Thriving After Divorce*.

I asked Demand to put me in touch with one of its best writers. The company put me in touch with Hayley Harrison, a thirty-year-old woman from Pittsburgh. She’d quit her job at a bank last year to stay home with her son, who is six and has autism, and writing freelance for Demand let her work around his therapy appointments. She was making \$60 an hour when she pushed herself, writing mainly about finance and travel, and had published around 7,000 pieces. I asked her what her secret was. For one thing, she said, don’t ignore the \$3 articles; you can get into a good rhythm with them. But how can you do something so thankless? I wanted to ask. I said something less rude than that, but she got the point. “I will do my best on every single article, even if I realize it will take me longer,” she said. “I’ll even call on the phone.”

I read some of Harrison’s stories. They were not to my taste but they were clearly better than mine: concise, easy to understand, full of what one nameless Demand editor called “actionable verbs.” An army of Harrisons would make Demand—or any media company whose business model depends on producing an ever-increasing amount of serviceable if not sparkling content—a success.

Clay Shirky doesn’t take issue with that. But he suggests that Demand could get into trouble if faced with a competitor that produced slightly better content at the same price. And Demand’s business model has an endemic problem. As long as people can type inquiries into search engines that go unmet, Demand has room to grow. But what happens when we get to the end of the tail? Not every question can be profitably answered. “At a certain point,” Shirky says, “the time-value of money suggests a limit. What I don’t know is, is that limit reached in two years, twenty years, or fifty years?”

He has a few ideas about the vitriol accompanying much news coverage of Demand. It’s hard for journalists to watch outsiders doing what they alone used to do. It’s worrisome to see important news go unreported. Most of all, though, Demand’s very existence is incontrovertible evidence that someone has found a way to take advantage of the way the web works, and it is not journalists or the people they work for. The companies that come after Demand, with refined algorithms and better search data and content, will suck advertising from news outlets. Market forces will sever the link between advertising and news that, for more than a century, gave us jobs and the resources to do them well. “If commoditization can do well,” Shirky says, “it really is a revolution, not just an adjustment.”

I didn’t need him to tell me that—my own proof came with unemployment benefits, more than a year ago.

One night not long ago, I e-mailed some of my recent stories to Heidi Carr, my boss for most of my eight *Herald* years. I waited twenty minutes and called her. Would these stories get me a newspaper job? Based on them, would she hire me back, if it were in her power?

Heidi always had trouble saying hard things, and she paused now. “No,” she said, after a while. “I don’t see any real reporting here. I don’t see anything.” **CJR**

---

NICHOLAS SPANGLER is a writer who lives in New York City.





# Ideas + Reviews

---

SECOND READ

## *The Devil's Football*

*H.L. Mencken airs his unexpurgated Prejudices*

BY BILL MARX

As we all know, serious criticism of the arts is leaving the pages of mainstream newspapers and magazines. Shrinking under the pressures of new-media innovation and the triumph of *Zagat*-inspired populism, the once potent prerogatives of cultural tastemakers are fading fast. For some prominent reviewers, including major American writers such as Joyce Carol Oates, criticism has become so marginalized that they are reluctant to judge negatively, setting their dainty digits to keyboard only to ladle out praise. Fighting for survival, furiously marketing themselves on the web, critics increasingly opt for an all-thumbs-up approach.

Given the mental and spiritual retreat of the critique, it is hard to believe that for a brief and (so far) unique time in our history, a journalistic critic named H. L. Mencken ruled the roost of American culture. Mencken was admired by the young and the rebellious, and feared by established plutocrats, artists, academics, religious leaders, and politicians. He accomplished this by exercising his right to be excessively, vulgarly, courageously, and charmingly negative.

At the height of his influence in the 1920s, when he was churning out the best-selling volumes in his *Prejudices* series, Mencken transformed criticism into a liberating force. He perfected a sledgehammer satiric art that delights in radical disturbance via the well-timed guffaw and the devastating deflation of ideologues, do-gooders, puritans, professors, and Bible thumpers. He was a basher of bosh who turned his dissection of democracy and its low-brow arts into riotous entertainment for tens of thousands of readers.

Of course, negativity was not a new tactic for a homegrown arts critic. Mencken admired Edgar Allan Poe, who earned his nickname of “tomahawk critic” thanks to his merciless lambasting of American reviewers and writers who chose patriotism over independence and high standards. Poe lamented “the gross paradox of liking a stupid book the better, because, sure enough, its stupidity is American.” Bouncing from publication to publication, the frequently penniless Poe was mauled rather than hailed for his dedication to honest judgment. He had few critical groupies; instead, he fended off regular invitations to duels and potential lawsuits from unhappy reviewers and authors.

Like Poe, who grew up in Virginia, Mencken was an outsider (from Baltimore) who wanted to make his reputation by taking on the northern cultural establishment. Mencken was also the beneficiary of the success of his friend James Huneker, who rose to prominence as an arts critic for a variety of small, ethnic, European-friendly music magazines at the turn of the century.

But Mencken thought his mentor was too accommodating, too willing to bottle up his disgust at the mainstream. It was time, he believed, for some cultural bloodshed. In his "Footnote on Criticism," Mencken argued that critical debate "does not necessarily establish the truth.... [Instead] it melodramatizes the business of the critic, and so convinces thousands of bystanders, otherwise inert,

propensity for glad-handing and self-congratulation is essentially a reassuring mask. Beneath, insists Mencken, sits a deep-seated fear of freedom, a dread where conformity and delusion combine into a death wish: "The one permanent emotion of the inferior man, as of all the simpler mammals, is fear—fear of the unknown, the complex, the inexplicable." To get at this dread, Mencken

with a vision of class warfare analyzed in John Carey's book *The Intellectuals and the Masses*. Modernists of Mencken's cut viewed suburban and lower-class workers as robotic, inert, hapless. By contrast, to them the *real* aristocracy thrived in the higher echelons of late nineteenth-century German and British society.

Yet Mencken differs from H. G. Wells and other British snobs of the era because he relishes America's carnival of mass inanity: Q. "If you find so much that is unworthy of reverence in the United States, then why do you live here?" A. "Why do men go to zoos?"

As it happens, the publication of *The Diary of H. L. Mencken* in 1989 revealed plenty of evidence that the critic could be as small-minded, conformist, and thuggish as his zoo mates. And even before then, the debunker had been expertly debunked by Alfred Kazin and other critics. They asserted that Mencken was a spent force by the end of the 1920s, that his feverish crusade against Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, his equivocations on World War II and the plight of the Jews, and his inability to deal with the issue of poverty rendered him an embarrassing antique.

Yet it is very much in the skeptical spirit of Mencken that his positions be scathingly critiqued as time goes by. For him, criticism is "anything but scientific, for it cannot reach judgments that are surely and permanently valid. The most it can do, at its best, is to pronounce verdicts that are valid here and now, in the light of living knowledge and prejudice." Indeed, it is our prejudices that give our opinions their zest, even as they inevitably twist and distort their connection with reality. A true critic "submits himself frankly to the flow of his time, and rejoices in its aliveness."

All of which is to say that his harshest detractors have failed to slam H. L. Mencken into the trashcan of history. And meanwhile, the arrival of two volumes from the Library of America containing the entire unabridged *Prejudices* comes at a beneficial time, given the problematic health of our society and letters. There's plenty that's still alive and kicking in these volumes, from Mencken's sexy negativity and stirring defense of intellectual freedom to his hilarious attacks on American ignorance, which

---

## There's still plenty that's alive and kicking in these volumes, from his sexy negativity and stirring defense of intellectual freedom, to his hilarious attacks on American ignorance.

that criticism is an amusing and instructive art, and that the problems it deals with are important. What men will fight for seems to be worth looking into."

Mencken drew on the growing frustration, particularly among the young, created by a period of rapid change and turmoil after World War I. A wised-up postwar generation, aroused by Mencken's bolts of bile, yearned to jettison (or at least question) the lockstep patriotism of the Gilded Age and the bigoted irrationality of the evangelical Right. He also made expert use of the new marketing attitudes and vocabulary of the 1920s—the era's love of zippy absolutes and linguistic flash—to sell an invigorating form of anti-Americanism. In the process Mencken revolutionized, to the point of fleetingly glamorizing, the image of the critic, whose essential responsibility was to attack all that Americans believe to be sacred. The shock treatment was therapeutic: lampooning complacency reveals the rot underneath society's smiling façade.

The *Prejudices* series, which originally numbered six volumes and was published between 1919 and 1927, gathered the author's reviews, commentaries, reporting, and portraits, many of them written for the *Smart Set*, *American Mercury*, and *The Baltimore Sun*. Throughout, he argues that our national

uses the explosives of anarchistic humor and ridicule, poking fun at our collective anxieties, contradictions, and hypocrisies.

Time after time, Mencken flays the hide off of what he calls *boobus Americanus*, maintaining that much of what passes for art, thought, and manners in the United States is balderdash. It is the exuberant gusto of his prose that makes Mencken more than a moldy scold:

What I see is a vast horde of inferior men broken, after a hopeless, fruitless fight, to the hard, uninspiring labor of the world—a race of slaves superbly regimented, and kept steadily in order by great brigades of propagandists, official optimists, scare-mongers, Great Thinkers and rev. clergy. And over them a minority of capitalist overlords, well-fed, well-protected, highly respected, politely envied, and lavishly supplied with endless stores of picture postcards, gasoline, silk underwear, mayonnaise, Pontet Canet, toilet soap and phonograph records.

Yes, times were simpler then. A number of Mencken's *bêtes noires* look like dusty stuffed animals today, from Comstockery and Sex Education to Prohibition. What's more, the author's colorful disdain for the rabble mixes a goofy understanding of Nietzsche and Darwin as theorists of an embattled "superman"

could flatten the political, religious, and academic wowzers of today.

THE ARTICLES MENCKEN WROTE FOR magazines and newspapers served as drafts for the pieces in the series; in that way he could respond to the initial reaction to his line of attack, honing his vituperation to a sharper edge. “I kept the *Prejudices* books in mind for all my magazine and newspaper work,” he writes in *My Life as Author and Editor*, “and not infrequently an idea that was first tried out in the Baltimore *Evening Sun* was later expanded and embellished in the *Smart Set* or some other magazine, and then finally polished for book form.”

Throughout the series he holds steady to his organizational formula. Each volume begins with a big bang aimed at a fat quadrant of American philistinism (“The American Tradition,” “Journalism in America,” “The National Letters,” “On Being an American”), followed by a grab bag of essays, portraits, book reviews, and squibs. His targets throughout range from the anemic state of the arts to complaints about the stupefying limitations of the American character to broadsides against the “experts” who believe they hold a monopoly on the truth, including the grand poobahs of religion, politics, academia, psychology, and economics.

---

## Mencken’s higher calling was to eradicate trash with panache.

There are also bracing riffs on the worth of human life, the battle of the sexes, America’s “lust to make the world intolerable,” and the nature of death—all infused with the critic’s belief in a mature “pessimism which comes with the discovery that the riddle of life, despite all the fine solutions offered by the learned doctors, is essentially insoluble.” This disparate material is held together by the force of Mencken’s personality,

which we might paradoxically define as a heavyweight gadfly. And despite the overwhelming pugnacity of tone, Mencken does sprinkle the books with occasional hosannas (a prescient appreciation of Ring Lardner, a salute to theater critic George Jean Nathan, a deftly ironic homage to arch-censor Anthony Comstock, an admiring shout-out to Ralph Waldo Emerson).

Because the *Prejudices* have been out of print for decades, our view of them has been mediated through anthologies, from Mencken’s own culling to picks by James T. Farrell and Terry Teachout. The Library of America volumes—which include helpful notes by editor Marion Elizabeth Rodgers—demonstrate the drawbacks of this cherry-picking approach: an enormous amount of amusing, provocative, and revealing material has been left out. Also, going through Mencken’s pieces as they were originally ordered suggests a more complex sensibility than the scattershot pugilist we encounter in the anthologies.

Mencken argues throughout the *Prejudices* that he sees criticism as an art. In “Footnote on Criticism,” he insists that the critic’s task is “to function freely and beautifully, to give outward and objective form to ideas that bubble inwardly and have a fascinating lure in them, to get rid of them dramatically and make an articulate noise in the world.” Truth, as Mencken saw it, was best left to the scientists. Criticism was not about truth, but about the creation of beguiling prose. In the name of art, critics were free to indulge their “prejudices, biles, naïvetés, [and] humors.”

But just what kind of an artist was Mencken? Although he championed such challenging writers of the era as Joseph Conrad, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and the now forgotten Joseph Hergesheimer, his crusade against simple-mindedness could be deeply conservative. He was often blind to innovation in America and elsewhere. For example, Mencken took a myopic view of experimental art, ridiculing what he saw as the surreal foolishness of Apollinaire and sideswiping T. S. Eliot along the way. (“It is the best joke pulled off on the Young Forward-Lookers since Eliot floored them with the notes to *The Waste Land*.”) His take on the Green-

wich Village rebels was equally tepid. A Mencken contradiction: the representative critic of the Jazz Age, admired by Edmund Wilson and F. Scott Fitzgerald, didn’t like jazz much.

Still, a careful examination of *Prejudices* suggests that Mencken did not simply want to make “articulate noise” for its own sake. He hoped that critical dissent would set off an explosion that would blow away conventional ideas and aid the birth of new approaches. Indeed, along with the ersatz Darwinism referred to earlier, the series is enlivened by an anarchistic strain. Many of the writers Mencken admires, from Conrad and Ibsen to Wells, believe that artistry is rooted in destruction as well as creation.

In “Private Reflections,” a 1922 *Smart Set* article, Mencken defends himself from the charge that his criticism is purely deconstructive—that he is no more than “a mere professional ruffian!” He writes:

I am constantly accused, and sometimes quite honestly, of tearing down without building up, of murdering a theory without offering in its place a new and better theory. My business, considering the state of the society in which I find myself, has been principally to clear the ground of moldering rubbish, to chase away old ghosts, to help set the artist free. The work of erecting a new structure belongs primarily to the artist as creator, not to me as a critic.

This vision of the critic as a demolition artist also puts some of Mencken’s wackier aesthetic and political verdicts into context. His purpose, his higher calling, was to eradicate trash with panache. This gave an almost adolescent glee to some of his efforts, such as his methodical, pitiless dismissal of his Scopes Monkey Trial foe William Jennings Bryan soon after the man’s death in 1925 (“In Memoriam: W. J. B.”).

Though it makes use of reason and logic, Mencken’s prose throughout the *Prejudices* sets up an internal, irrational drama: it pits the rabid energy of the author’s mind and the slangy friskiness of his vocabulary against the width and breath of American chaos. The critic needs to command two-ton adjectives, burly verbs, and exotic nouns because

there is so much utter nonsense to cart away. A more modest style simply couldn't contend with, say, an American presidential campaign: "Would it be possible to imagine anything more uproariously idiotic—a deafening, nerve-wracking battle to the death between Tweedledum and Tweedledee, Harlequin and Sganarelle, Gobbo and Dr. Cook—the unspeakable, with fearful snorts, gradually swallowing the inconceivable?"

Despite this rhetorical firepower, Mencken's habitual stance is that of an impartial observer, a reporter valiantly attempting to describe a parade of monstrosities. He wants you to see what he sees. Reviewing a dry tome entitled *The Social Objectives of School English*, he gets rolling in the very first sentence: "Here in the form of a large flat book, eight and a half inches wide and eleven inches tall, is a sight-seeing bus touring the slums of pedagogy." The entire series teems with exaggerated visual metaphors. Mencken hot-wires descriptive language, mashes together argot high and low, in order to shake his readers awake.

The author is also fond of huge, eye-catching generalizations: "Hygiene is the corruption of medicine by morality." Or (in a somewhat more archaic vein): "Women like to be wooed endlessly before they loose their girdles and are wooed no more." He likes to follow these lofty overviews with endless, absurd, faux-Whitmanesque lists. For example, in "On Being an American," Mencken delights in toting up the nation's most coveted jobs: "Let him bear in mind that, whatever its neglect of the humanities and their monks, the Republic has never got half enough bond salesmen, quack doctors, ward leaders, phrenologists, Methodist evangelists, circus clowns, magicians, soldiers, farmers, popular song writers, moonshine distillers, forgers of gin labels, mine guards, detectives, spies, snoopers, and *agents provocateurs*." Where Whitman heard America singing, Mencken hears it braying like an ass.

Catching that sound is a big part of his mission, requiring all of his reportorial chops. In the age of Glenn Beck, his rousing jeremiads against Christian Fundamentalism remain as vivid and incisive as ever. He saw early on that the movement embodied a yen for a

## Despite this rhetorical firepower, Mencken's habitual stance is that of an impartial observer, a reporter valiantly attempting to describe a parade of monstrosities.

theocratic America. In "Memorial Service" ("Where is the grave-yard of dead gods?") Mencken lists the deities that have bit the dust over the centuries—giving atheism the same sort of shot in the arm that Christopher Hitchens did in his recent *God Is Not Great*. However, his coverage in *Prejudices* of the Scopes Monkey kerfuffle, "The Hills of Zion," is somewhat disappointing. (Readers eager for a sharper take should seek out *A Religious Orgy in Tennessee*, which collects his actual dispatches from the trial.)

An irascible comic stylist who envisions the world as a "vast, lumbering, hideous, obscene ball of mud—the football of the devil," Mencken serves as a bridge between the sour yuks of Mark Twain and Ambrose Bierce and the apocalyptic satire of Nathanael West, as well as S. J. Perelman's linguistic acrobatics. His jaunty nihilism feeds American anti-utopian satire to this very day. Vulgar, combative, unfair, and on target, he may also be seen as the godfather of Internet trolls, though his comic conceits are much more substantial and inventive.

AS EARLY AS 1931, MENCKEN NOTED IN his diary that the *Prejudices* series was aging badly: "My plan is to let the *Prejudices* books go out of print. Large parts of them begin to date. What is still good I shall rewrite and republish, probably in two volumes instead of six." He never got around to the task—and given the changing times, his rejiggered volumes might have gotten a mixed reception. As the years passed, Mencken's vaudevillian bravado became increasingly predictable. Even an admiring reviewer, Stanley T. Williams, had to confess his fatigue in a 1923 *Yale Review* notice of *Prejudices: Third Series*: "My own charge against him is probably new—a heretical charge. That unending flow of German phrases, that avalanche of cheap simile, that insistence upon a pet joke, such as 'Dr. Wilson,' the

incoherence, the vilification, the ignorance, in spite of a quotation or two from Martial—surely this is, in the last analysis—is it not?—just boring." To that bill of fare could be added ethnic comments that make even thick-skinned readers flinch: "No other race, save the Chinese, is so thoroughly solid, or so firmly unresponsive to ideas from without."

On the whole, though, the whambam prose more than outweighs the moments of discomfort. Among the gems is Mencken's wonderful 1927 review of a *Festschrift* dedicated to a retired master "mixologist"—a wise fixture in Washington, D.C., who knew just when to cut off serving the hard stuff to politicians. In this loving elegy to the bartender's trade ("an art that made men happy"), Mencken notes that in the photo of the saloon keeper at the front of the volume, the "light of tragedy" is visible in his eye. (We can probably blame that on Prohibition.) "He looks as Washington would have looked if he had lived to see Coolidge," concludes Mencken.

No doubt that same tragic look will be found on some of the writers safely enshrined in our literary Valhalla, Library of America. The "schoolmarmish" targets of Mencken's acidic sarcasm, such as William Dean Howells and Henry James, will now discover their tomes sitting cheek-by-jowl with the scoffing *Prejudices*. Perhaps even those who no longer think criticism should utter a discouraging word will tremble to see this arch-critic in such a lordly literary berth. And Mencken, in the afterlife reserved for hell-bent non-believers, is probably thundering forth a long horselaugh. **CJR**

---

BILL MARX has contributed book, theater, and arts reviews to a variety of national publications and NPR. He is the editor of the *World Books* web page for the PRI/BBC program *The World*, and the online magazine *The Arts Fuse*. He teaches a class on the past and future of American arts criticism at Boston University.



HARVARD Kennedy School

**JOAN SHORENSTEIN CENTER**  
on the Press, Politics and Public Policy

# GOLDSMITH *awards*

\$25,000 Prize for  
Investigative Reporting

Deadline is **December 31, 2010.**

For more information,  
please contact:

**Goldsmith Awards Program**  
Joan Shorenstein Center  
Harvard Kennedy School  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
617-495-1329

[www.shorensteincenter.org](http://www.shorensteincenter.org)

## CALL FOR ENTRIES



The annual contest of  
Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc.

**DEADLINE: Postmark by**  
**Jan. 14, 2011**

**HONORING THE BEST  
IN INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM**

Entry forms online at [www.ire.org/contest](http://www.ire.org/contest)

### NEW AWARDS

**Partnership or Collaboration:**

An IRE Medal for Outstanding Investigative Reporting or an IRE Certificate of Recognition for a partnership or collaboration among various entities.

**Gannett Award for Innovation in Watchdog Journalism:**

The award recognizes the use of digital innovation in the gathering and/or delivery of watchdog and investigative news to its audience. It honors work that stands out for its creative use of digital tools to further a news organization's ability to serve as watchdogs in their community. This comes with a \$5,000 prize from Gannett.

# Siberian Rhapsody

Ian Frazier ventures across the steppe and back in time

BY TED CONOVER

IAN FRAZIER IS ONE OF THE FEW TRUE stylists in nonfiction writing today. Along with Susan Orlean and not many others (would that David Foster Wallace were still around), he writes in a fashion that is recognizably and unmistakably his own. Much of his writing consists of short humor pieces, mostly for *The New Yorker*, often built around a conceit of oddball juxtapositions. In the title essay of *Lamentations of the Father*, for example, a dad delivers a series of warnings and homilies to his young children in the portentous syntax of the Old Testament. (“Of the beasts of the field, and of the fishes of the sea, and of all foods that are acceptable in my sight you may eat, but not in the living room.”)

Frazier is probably known best, however, for books such as *Great Plains, Family*, and *On the Rez*, which take him out of New York and into history and wide open spaces. In these works, the first-person narrator comes and goes, generally mild and self-effacing: there is no risk of authorial bravado in a Frazier book.

His first such production in a long time, *Travels in Siberia* is also the most ambitious, in terms of the time it took (Frazier began researching his book in 1993) and the sweep of his subject. Siberia is 6,000 miles across and spans eight time zones, making up three-quarters of Russia and one-twelfth of the land on earth. It has a long human history, which Frazier also wants to explore. The 544-page book is the result of several trips; the arduous seven-week summertime drive across Siberia, which is its centerpiece, was completed, as circumstance would have it, on September 11, 2001. Frazier’s final trip, a short visit to Novosibirsk, was made last fall.

Frazier begins with a convincing account of how he was “infected with a love of Russia” in middle age. A lecture in New York by two Soviet dissident artists, Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid, led to a *New Yorker* piece about them. The ensuing friendship with Melamid resulted in a trip to Siberia and immersion in the artist’s circle, with Frazier firmly ensconced behind a linguistic barrier: “[A]ll the conversation was in Russian, and I became a cat or a dog, understanding nothing except once in a while my own name.” Just the same, he leaves exultant: “Moscow was the greatest place I’d ever been, and Russia the greatest country I’d ever seen.”

Frazier begins a study of Russian, taking lessons first in the émigré commu-

nity of Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, and later in St. Petersburg. He reads deeply in Russian history and literature, paying special mind to Pushkin. There is a dignity and gravitas he appreciates in Russia, and he is enchanted even by its characteristic smell, whose components he identifies as diesel fuel, tea bags, cucumber peels, wet cement, sour milk, chilly air, and currant jam. By contrast, he says, America smells like the Cinnabon franchise in the airport in Anchorage. Frazier concludes, “The smell of America says, ‘Come in and buy.’ The smell of Russia says, ‘Ladies and gentlemen: Russia!’”

After this, he visits Nome, Alaska, which he describes in some wonderful passages, but which is not Siberia. There are also brief trips to the Chukchi Peninsula, right across the Bering Strait from Alaska, and the nearby Diomed Islands—but these places, too, have a fairly tenuous connection to the essential, Russian-flavored Siberia. Many pages are spent on the history of Genghis Khan and the Mongols, with the narrator hardly present, and on earlier accounts of travels in Siberia by other writers, of which there are many. Frazier focuses on one such chronicle by an Ohio telegraph operator named George Frost Kennan (after his distant relative, George Kennan, the twentieth-century diplomat and Russia expert). The untutored Kennan had some interesting travels and wrote a good book. But by the time Frazier, who was born in Cleveland and grew up in Hudson, Ohio, gets around to noting the many other Ohio-Siberia historical connections (“That’s five people from Ohio visiting and writing about Siberia in the space of fifteen years, or an average of one Ohioan every three years;”), the conceit has worn a bit thin. We want to hit the road!

We finally do on page 178. In St. Petersburg, on an earlier visit, Frazier has introduced himself to officials at the Museum of the Arctic and the Antarctic, and asked for their advice on how to drive across Siberia. They hook him up with a guide, Sergei, who brings along an assistant, Volodya—“tough and competent-looking” men who belong to a nationwide emergency rescue organization called the Ministry of Extraordinary Situations.

## Travels in Siberia

By Ian Frazier  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux  
544 pages, \$30

Frazier stakes them \$4,500 for the purchase of a vehicle, and remarks on their odd choice when he returns and sees it in Sergei's garage: a Renault delivery van. The van strikes him "as not Siberia-ready. It looked more suited to delivering sour cream and eggs, the job it had done until recently." But with Sergei at the wheel, the trio crosses the Urals and heads toward the Pacific. At last, the travels in Siberia have begun.

It is a boon to the story that the van is prone to breakdown—and a boon to the trip that Sergei has an almost magical ability to get it fixed. There being few motels in Siberia, the group mostly camps out. In what becomes a recurrent pattern, the guides establish camp at night, cook dinner, let Frazier set up in his tent...and then take off to meet women. Frazier's Russian is not very good and he doesn't object to this abandonment, which is both understandable and kind of sad. In the daytime, though, he's more in charge. His readings in Russian history and travel literature have prepared him with a list of places he hopes to stop and explore. Frazier's Siberia is intimately connected to history; he collects buildings and locations that may not seem too important in today's world, but which once had profound meaning.

Early in the journey, for example, he tries to find a brick pillar that he read about in George Kennan's book. The pillar, 150 miles east of Ekaterinburg, marked the boundary between the western Russian province of Tobolsk and the Siberian province of Perm. It stood on an old road, the Trakt, along which, during tsarist days, thousands of prisoners passed every year. At the pillar they were allowed to pause, look back, pick up a little of the dirt of western Russia, and say goodbye before "jumping off into the void." Like many other things he's looking for, the pillar has disappeared. Yet the legacy of exile is palpable to Frazier, who believes that a landscape can be permanently marked by human sadness.

Of course, the seriousness of Siberia is almost *a priori*: its use as a place of banishment dates to the time of the tsars. Frazier wants to stop at prisons and former prison camps on the drive, but time and again it doesn't work out. He finally concludes that's because Sergei and Volodya, out of a mixture

of pride, prudence, and perhaps a faint sense of shame, would rather he focus on other things.

More typically, Frazier will describe the feel of a city or town, what's cool about it, and what's in its museum. Al-

## Frazier's Siberia is intimately connected to history.

ways, *always*, Frazier must stop in at the museum. These visits make sense for an historical travelogue like this, but by the end I could see them coming: another town, another museum. Frazier's style, of course, accords honor to the quirky and the serendipitous; readers of his earlier works will recognize his interest in ravens and trash. Siberia turns out to have plenty of both—and from the reader's point of view, too much.

On the other hand, when the right balance between seriousness and humor is struck, which is more often than not, there is a magic in the book that is Frazier's alone. *Travels in Siberia* is full of marvels. One is the *steklyanniy plyazh*, or glass beach, near Vladivostok, composed of an infinity of bottle shards. "Green and amber and blue and pink and brown and clear glass fragments lay ankle-deep everywhere and lifted and fell in the waves," Frazier recounts, "sand slowly returning to sand." We learn the true tale of flamingoes that fell from the sky, on two separate occasions, near in the village of Verkhnemarkovo, and survived. On a more sobering note, there is the remote Topolinskaya Highway, built by slave labor under Stalin. The road, writes Frazier, "appeared to have been beaten into the earth by hands, feet, and bodies. Almost unaided, human beings had forced it through the wilderness. To the right and left, the roadside showed none of the healed-but-still-visible gouges you see along roads built by earthmoving machines."

Charmingly, another aspect of Frazier's Russia-love is his appreciation of the

Train at one of the nation's premier master's programs

## Medical & Science Journalism Program



### University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

- Generous Park Fellowships include tuition, stipend and research funds
- Learn multimedia skills
- Interdisciplinary program

Apply by Jan. 1, 2011

Tom Linden, M.D.  
jomc.unc.edu/medicaljournalism  
919.962.4078  
medmedia2010@unc.edu



UNC  
SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM  
AND MASS COMMUNICATION

beauty of Russian women. The Cold War stereotype of them as rough and ugly he regards as nearly incomprehensible. In city after city, his head is turned, and this particular trope comes with some equally charming self-awareness: "The Mariinsky [opera house] is another excellent setting in which to remark on the beauty of Russian women, but I will pass up the opportunity, except to mention the woman in the box next to ours wearing the black top and midriff-baring pants who had long honey-blond hair to the middle of her back and a lithe ease of movement that was a distraction to be near."

Frazier's Siberia, it should be noted, is quite distinct from the average journalist's Russia, and generally unconnected to headlines about autocracy, pollution, and breakaway republics. Vladimir Putin's name does not appear until the very end, when we're learning about Siberian oil production and are told that the prime minister "showed up to inaugurate a new Lukoil station at Tenth Avenue and Twenty-fourth Street in Manhattan." (Since it's Frazier reporting, we also are apprised that Putin "held a cup of coffee and a Krispy Kreme donut in his hands.")

The figures from Russian history that the author most admires are the Decembrists, the passionate young reformers who attempted a revolt in December 1825, and instead mostly ended up dead or exiled to Siberia. (He has a "favorite Decembrist," Ivan Yakushkin, who had the self-possession to admire a Renaissance painting on the wall while he was being prepped for a session with the enraged Tsar Nicholas I.) For the sake of convenience, Sergei actually tells people they meet along the road that his companion is doing a research project on the Decembrists. It's fitting, then, that Frazier should end the book with an unfinished sentence by a Decembrist, Prince Sergei Volkonsky, who was writing a memoir in his old age when he was, well, interrupted. It's one of the strangest, most original endings I know—and perfectly Ian Frazier. **CJR**

---

TED CONOVER is a distinguished writer-in-residence at New York University's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute. His latest book is *The Routes of Man*, about roads.

---

## BOOK REVIEW

# History as Soundbites

*A televised vision of the twentieth century*

BY ROBERT L. O'CONNELL

READING *WE WERE THERE: AN EYEWITNESS History of the Twentieth Century* was a fast-paced but wrenching experience, since it left me splayed on the horns of a dilemma: whether to succumb to its pleasures or dig in my heels and protest.

Let me explain. The book is built around a mass of eyewitness accounts, many of them recorded by journalists.

"All aim at the same magical effect," explains the volume's editor, Robert Fox (himself a reporter and broadcaster), "of giving the reader the sensation of being there at great and curious events, and with extraordinary people."

TV's vision of history, in other words. That at least was my sensation. Reading the book became like watching a vast televised documentary—gripping and apparently edifying at the moment, but upon later reflection, hollow and warped like a funhouse mirror. As presented here, life in the twentieth century has been largely a matter of violence and sudden death. A space alien, having read *We Were There*, would conclude that the era consisted exclusively of wars, with some exciting stuff like exploration and revolution thrown in; that the Earth was largely populated by venturesome, death-defying males (many of them journalists), and that human beings had no concept whatsoever of cause and effect. Events here just sort of happen, virtually naked of plausible causation and clad in the merest tissue of explanatory material. Yet they are still riveting and dramatic, so you keep reading, mesmerized like a kid in front of a widescreen. It's fun, but it isn't really history, or shouldn't be.

It's pretty clear that Americans live in a time of vast historical ignorance; it even seems to be accelerating. Some might argue that's not such a bad thing in rapidly changing times, that the past simply has no precedent to measure the impact of things like iPhones.

That may be true for electronics. But we remain human beings, big mammals with the same genes and much the same cultural approach as our ancestors. We also seem to be prone to many of the same foibles, including a gift for historical amnesia. "Those who do not remember the past," Santayana warned, "are condemned to repeat it." Mark Twain remained skeptical about the repeating part of history, but he did add that "sometimes it rhymes." That's a useful notion. Just as

**We Were There:  
An Eyewitness History of the  
Twentieth Century**  
Edited by Robert Fox  
Overlook Press  
391 pages, \$30



**End of the line** Shackleton's ship, the *Endurance*, trapped in pack-ice, 1915.

rhyming helps us to sing a song, historical analogy can get a statesman oriented and ready to face a crisis, or explain to a population the whys and wherefores of events confronting them. History can be valuable stuff—if only more people would read it.

Actually, there are plenty of signs that Americans (or at least some of them) do want to know about their past: witness the legions of genealogy perusers and Civil War reenactors. But you can only take such things so far. Real historical understanding requires access to a compelling and edifying body of literature.

Unfortunately, academic history, which generally does provide a balanced and analytic approach to describing the past, is all too often not much fun to read. In part, this is simply due to subject matter. Careful historical treatments of economic and technological developments, immigration, or labor trends are simply not as eye-catching as mass mayhem. That's a given. But many academic historians compound the problem with an almost mulish proclivity to write badly, or more accurately, without any style at all. The end product is a kind of scholarly mush garnished with indigestible block quotes, all of it manifesting a profound indifference to the appetites of the reader.

There is also a reluctance to write narrative history—to present broad portraits of substantial chunks of time.

Instead, the field is filled with specialists whose instinct is to produce monographs miles deep and inches wide. Yet we human beings are addicted to stories; it is our nature and heritage. This is what people look for when they come to history. And when they can't find it, they stop coming.

Print journalists have helped to fill the void, turning out a steady stream of readable biographies, narratives, and even some insightful analytic histories. Gifted writers stretching from Frederick Lewis Allen through David Halberstam have illuminated the history of the twentieth century, backed up by others like Bruce Catton and David McCullough, who have done equivalent services for earlier time periods. What passes for historical consciousness in this country exists largely because of such efforts.

Of course, the journalistic approach has its shortcomings. Since its practitioners often lack deep learning in the area under study, their work sometimes falls prey to conventional wisdom, and seldom encompasses the best of new academic thinking. Still, if there is a better future for the past in America, it probably lies in the hazy territory between the print journalists and the professional historians, an amalgam that might promise both rigor and style to hungry readers.

The alternative—a mating of the

## COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

**to order:**

**by phone:**  
**1-888-4-CJR-SUB**  
**(1-888-425-7782)**

**online: [www.cjr.org](http://www.cjr.org)**

**STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP,  
MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION**

Title of publication: *Columbia Journalism Review*. Publication number: 0804-780. Date of filing: October 1, 2010. Frequency: Bimonthly. Number of issues published annually: Six. Annual subscription: \$27.95. Address: 2950 Broadway, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027. Publisher: Cathryn C. Cranston; Executive Editor: Michael Hoyt; Managing Editor: Brent Cunningham. Owner: Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York. Known bondholders, mortgages, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, and other securities: None. The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status of this organization for Federal income tax purposes has not changed during the preceding 12 months.

**EXTENT AND NATURE OF CIRCULATION  
AVERAGE NO. OF COPIES DURING  
PRECEDING 12 MONTHS:**

A. Total No. of Copies:	22,774
B. Paid and/or Requested Circulation:	
(1) Paid/Requested Outside-County Mail Subscriptions:	15,858
(2) Paid In-County Subscriptions:	0
(3) Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales:	1,697
(4) Other Classes Mailed Through USPS:	0
C. Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation:	17,555
D. Free Distribution by Mail:	
(1) Outside-County:	528
(2) In-County:	0
(3) Mailed at other classes	0
(4) Outside the mail	358
E. Free Distribution Outside the Mail:	886
F. Total Distribution:	18,441
G. Copies Not Distributed:	4,333
H. Total	22,774
I. Percent Paid and/or Requested Circulation:	95.2

**ACTUAL NO. OF COPIES OF SINGLE  
ISSUE PUBLISHED NEAREST TO FILING  
DATE (SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2010):**

A. Total No. of Copies:	21,389
B. Paid and/or Requested Circulation:	
(1) Paid/Requested Outside-County Mail Subscriptions:	15,106
(2) Paid In-County Subscriptions:	0
(3) Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales:	1,191
(4) Other Classes Mailed Through USPS:	0
C. Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation:	16,297
D. Free Distribution by Mail:	
(1) Outside-County:	506
(2) In-County:	0
(3) Mailed at other classes	0
(4) Outside the mail	200
E. Free Distribution Outside the Mail:	706
F. Total Distribution:	17,003
G. Copies not Distributed:	4,386
H. Total Distribution:	21,389
I. Percent Paid and/or Requested Circulation:	95.8

I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete. I understand that anyone who furnishes false or misleading information on this form or who omits material or information requested on this form may be subject to criminal sanctions (including fines and imprisonment) and/or civil sanctions (including civil penalties).

Dennis F. Giza, Deputy Publisher, 9/20/10

scribes and the Tube—is served by *We Were There*. I've got to admit that to most palates, it will taste just fine: like caramel corn, virtually addictive. Whatever other shortcomings this book may have, it's a great read. After all, it is human interest that interests humans, and this collection serves it up in copious quantities.

Sized for snacking—typically around three to five pages—almost all the accounts are exceedingly well written. So much so that a short vignette by Anne Frank, whom I remember as being a pretty good writer, seems almost flat by comparison. There are plenty of these nuggets, too, more than one hundred and fifty, on virtually every topic with a record of having stimulated a popular response at the time: an unbeatable formula for gluing eyes, including my own, to the page. There is an abundance of journalism, but also frequent dollops of diaries, memoirs, poems, songs, and novels to add a bit of complexity to the concoction.

None of this gets at the really seductive quality of *We Were There*. That is embedded in the text itself, among the chilling turns of phrase, the macabre details, the outlandish circumstances, the weird responses to catastrophe, the casual recounting of death. Being what it is, the book left me with just a series of impressions, a bunch of jagged particulars that stick in the mind like grit.

Consider some of these. A gust of wind destroying the Wright Brothers' machine at the end of flight's first day. A polar explorer on his way to a polite suicide: "I am just going outside and may be some time." Dating tips from the Albanian highlands, circa 1909: "Abduction of a girl demands blood, as does of course adultery." The battered crew of the dreadnought *Warspite* being jeered as cowards upon limping home from Jutland. The musings of a chaplain during an all-nighter with a deserter set to be shot at dawn. The response of a House of Morgan partner to Black Thursday: "It seems there has been some disturbed selling in the market." A journalist considering his prospects in Guernica: "[T]here hadn't been a war in eighteen years, long enough for the ones who went through the last one to forget, and for a generation and a half who knew nothing of war to be inter-

ested." The fact that in 1936, Mao had the world's heftiest reward—\$250,000—on his head. A Spitfire pilot about to strike a gaggle of Junker 88s during the Battle of Britain: "I'll have your guts for garters."

And that's not all. There's the consternation of a journalist upon discovering that Ernest Hemingway had already emancipated the bar of the Hotel Ritz, a key booze-related contribution to the Allied liberation of Paris. The fact that the mushroom cloud at Bikini atoll was 23,000 feet high and 11,600 feet in diameter. A South African judge not sentencing Nelson Mandela to death. The words of an American general in Vietnam: "I don't know how you think about war. The way I see it, I'm just like any other company boss, gingering up the boys all the time, except I don't make money. I just kill people, and save lives." The results of Saddam Hussein's 1988 chemical-weapons attack on Halabja: "Near by, a family of five who had been sitting in their garden eating lunch was cut down—the killer gas not even sparing the family cat, or the birds in the tree which littered the well-kept lawn." A bit later, it's Tutsi corpses littering the streets of the Rwandan capital Kigali. Then it's two lovers, Serb and Muslim, four days dead on the pavement, cut down by sniper bullets in Sarajevo. The scene slides to New York and 9/11: "And then, within an hour, as my wife and I watched from the Brooklyn building's roof, the south tower dropped from the screen of our viewing; it fell straight down like an elevator, with a tinkling shiver and a groan of concussion distinct across the mile of air. We knew we had just witnessed thousands of deaths..." Enter the War on Terror... and on and on and on and on.

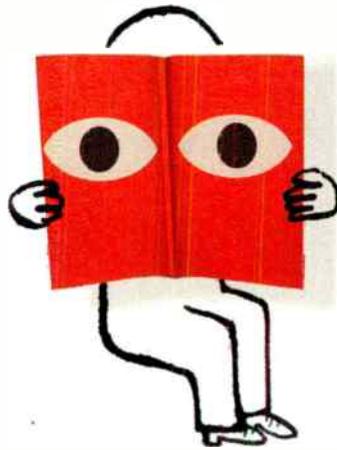
Take this book to the beach. Read it from beginning to end. Read it backwards. Start from the middle; it won't matter. It's history as sound bites; they are all pretty much interchangeable. You won't learn much, but you won't be bored. As the song goes: "It's interesting when people die." **CJR**

ROBERT L. O'CONNELL is the author of five works of history, the most recent being *The Ghosts of Cannae: Hannibal and the Darkest Hour of the Roman Republic*.

BY JAMES BOYLAN

**Common as Air: Revolution, Art, and Ownership**By Lewis Hyde  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux  
306 pages, \$26

THE U.S. CONSTITUTION includes a clause authorizing Congress to give to authors and scientists exclusive rights to the uses of their work—but for only a limited time. The original “limited time,” referring to copyrights, was fourteen years. In 1998, however, Congress passed the Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act, which extended the reach of such protections until the year 2130. (The legislation, which was named after the performer-congressman who died in a skiing accident, is also commonly referred to as the Mickey Mouse Protection Act, for the great and near-permanent blessings it bestowed upon the Disney enterprises.) In *Common As Air*, Lewis Hyde insists that the Founders were right to restrict copyright terms and thus enhance what flowed into the public domain, or commons. In particular, he finds in Benjamin Franklin an advocate of the idea that authors and inventors inevitably benefit from the work of those who have gone before, and are thus obligated to pass on the fruits of their own work to those who succeed them. According to this argument, a copyright or patent is a temporary benefit designed to stimulate new work, not to enable a perpetual monopoly. Instead, Hyde points out, copyright has come to be considered as enduring as



land ownership, and copyright violations, of which he cites a fistful, regarded as more criminal than trespass. The author does find at least scraps of encouragement in such recent communal effort as the mapping of the human genome, and the sharing of scholarship by way of, for example, the Internet’s Creative Commons. Such a terse summary as this one, it should be said, scarcely does justice to the variety and elegance of Hyde’s book. *Common As Air* makes an eloquent case for the protection of the public domain, even (or especially) at the cost of private holdings.

**The Inside Stories of Modern Political Scandals: How Investigative Reporters Have Changed the Course of American History**By Woody Klein  
Forward by Jeff Greenfield  
Praeger  
237 pages, \$44.95

WOODY KLEIN, WHO PUT in his time as an investigative reporter in a long and variegated career, here offers a recounting of major investigative coups of the past sixty years. The older ones, such as the Woodward-Bernstein Watergate stories, may be standard fare by now. But half

a dozen are from the last decade, and it is a distinct service to have them described, often in the words of the reporters themselves, whom Klein interviewed at length. The reader hears from Bethany McLean of *Fortune* magazine, who put

the kibosh on Enron; Eric Lichtblau and James Risen of *The New York Times*, who exposed the Bush administration’s vast program of domestic eavesdropping; and Dana Priest of *The Washington Post*, who uncovered the practice of shipping terror suspects abroad and exposing them to torture. There are also excellent chapters devoted to Anne Hull and Priest of the *Post*, who uncovered the conditions at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, and Tom Lasseter of *The Miami Herald*, whose dogged pursuit of former Guantanamo prisoners exposed a rash of irregularities at the detainment camp. One is impressed in each case by the calm professionalism and reticence of this new generation of reporters, undeterred by difficulty or potential danger.

**The Silent Season of a Hero: The Sports Writing of Gay Talese**Edited by Michael Rosenwald  
Walker & Company  
308 pages, \$16 paper

MELANCHOLY PERVADES this anthology, which is drawn from Gay Talese’s abundant sports reportage. Assembled by Michael Rosenwald of *The Wash-*

*ington Post*, the collection reaches back sixty years into nostalgia land to reprint Talese’s teenage stories on high-school sports for his hometown newspaper, the *Ocean City Sentinel-Ledger*. Later on, Talese wrote about traditional sports in increasingly untraditional ways. Often he focused on faded glory, notably that of the heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson, knocked out twice by Sonny Liston: Patterson’s life after his defeats became the subject of a dispassionate but sensitive article in *Esquire*, bluntly titled “The Loser.” The other *Esquire* articles reprinted here take a similar tack. We encounter Joe Louis running a public-relations business, and Muhammad Ali, weighed down with Parkinson’s, visiting Castro in Cuba. But the most famous example of this genre, and the one that gives this anthology its title, is a 1966 story about Joe DiMaggio, written not long after the death of his former wife Marilyn Monroe—an article widely celebrated for its candor and understated compassion. “And so,” wrote Talese, “the baseball hero must always act the part, must preserve the myth, and none does it better than DiMaggio. . . .” Nor does anyone tell it better than Talese at the top of his game. **CJR**

JAMES BOYLAN is the founding editor of the *Columbia Journalism Review* and professor emeritus of journalism and history at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

# Home and Away

*A husband, a wife, and how each endured the same tragedy*

BY JULIA M. KLEIN

TWO YEARS AGO, DAVID ROHDE, A FOREIGN correspondent and investigative reporter for *The New York Times*, was writing a book about U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. To complete it, he figured he needed just one more interview: a potentially risky face-to-face with a Taliban commander.

Unlike the stereotypical war correspondent, Rohde did not consider himself an adrenaline junkie. As a reporter for *The Christian Science Monitor*, he was detained in 1995 by Serbian forces after confirming the Srebrenica massacre of at least seven thousand Bosnian Muslim men. For ten days he was threatened and interrogated—an experience he wasn't eager to repeat.

The massacre story did, however, garner a Pulitzer Prize, and led to Rohde's first book, *Endgame: The Betrayal and Fall of Srebrenica*. And now Rohde's competitors were interviewing Taliban leaders. Absent a similar interview, he writes in *A Rope and a Prayer: A Kidnapping from Two Sides*, Rohde feared he might be regarded as "a New York-based journalistic fraud." There are, it turns out, worse things.

Rohde stumbled into a trap. Along with his Afghan translator and his driver, the reporter would spend months in harrowing captivity in remote areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. While not tortured or beaten, he was tormented by the fear that he and his companions might undergo the same fate as the *Wall Street Journal* reporter, Daniel Pearl, beheaded by Pakistani terrorists in 2002.

In time, Rohde managed to escape. He got his book, too—a more thrilling story than he had initially envisioned. *A Rope and a Prayer* expands on a series that first appeared in *The New York Times*, situating the kidnapping in the context of war, jihad, and the politics and culture of Afghanistan's Pashtun majority. This additional context slows the narrative, but also enriches it.

So does the valuable perspective of Rohde's wife, Kristen Mulvihill. A photo editor at *Cosmopolitan*, Mulvihill had been married to Rohde just two months when he was kidnapped in November 2008. Unfolding in alternating voices, their book is the touching tale of two latecomers to marriage who rely on love, prayer, and quotidian memories to survive their separation.

Though the outcome is never in doubt, *A Rope and a Prayer* is an absorbing read, filled with wonderful details and high irony. While Rohde is compelled by his kidnapers to star in crudely staged videos pleading for ransom, Mulvihill is presiding over

elaborately orchestrated photo shoots of pampered stars for *Cosmopolitan*. Eventually, she takes a leave of absence.

Meanwhile, Rohde has ample time to ponder the incongruities of his captivity. For the Taliban, religious fanaticism coexists with Internet savvy and an attraction to video games and American war movies. The West is the enemy, but inescapable. American pop-culture icons decorate the prisoners' bedding, and their guards enjoy singing along to the Beatles' song "She Loves You."

During his seven-month captivity, Rohde tried numerous ploys to pressure his captors, including feigning sickness, starting a hunger strike, and faking a suicide attempt. To gain their favor, he requested and studied an English-language Koran. Whether these tactics helped is never clear.

At home in New York, Mulvihill turned out to be an unexpectedly tough customer. Buoyed by family support and her Catholic faith, she bridled at what she saw as the mixed motives of many of those charged with helping her.

For the most part, she recounts, *Times* publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr. and her husband's editors were warm and supportive during her ordeal. On the advice of experts, the paper kept the kidnapping secret, orchestrating a controversial news blackout. The blackout held even after Rohde shared a *Times* Pulitzer for reporting from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

But after Rohde escaped on June 20, 2009, the paper began to pressure Mulvihill for quotes. When *Times* executive editor Bill Keller pleaded the need to "feed the beast," she managed this feisty retort: "Bill, I think David would ask that you starve the beast and let it die."

No such luck. The newspaper, determined not to be beaten on its own story, rushed an article about the kidnapping and escape into print. According to Rohde, the *Times* got one detail wrong and also potentially endangered his driver, who remained behind, by naming him. So before leaving Afghanistan, and before his long-awaited reunion with his wife, the exhausted reporter had a professional obligation to discharge: e-mailing his editors two corrections from overseas. **CJR**

JULIA M. KLEIN is a *CJR* contributing editor.

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY · SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

JOURNAL OF  
**INTERNATIONAL  
AFFAIRS**

SINCE 1947

ANNOUNCING THE FALL/WINTER 2010 ISSUE

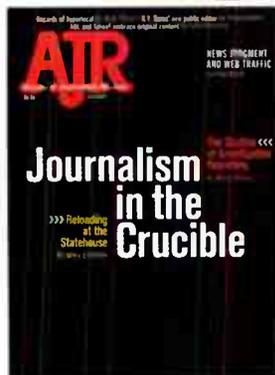
**INNOVATING FOR DEVELOPMENT**

AVAILABLE DECEMBER 2010

*Featuring*

*Michael T. Jones (Google), Rajiv Shah (USAID), Randi Zuckerberg (Facebook)  
... and many more.*

[jia.sipa.columbia.edu](http://jia.sipa.columbia.edu)



# YOUR PARTNERS IN THE CLASSROOM

## CJR and AJR

Today's journalism students will be shaping the future of the news industry. Giving them the right questions to ask and the right values to carry forward is more important than ever. 'CJR and AJR in the Classroom' bring the most relevant issues and challenges in the business to life. Incorporate the rich resources of AJR and CJR into your journalism program today.

To become part of 'CJR and AJR in the Classroom' contact CJR deputy publisher Dennis F. Giza at 212-854-2718 or [dfg2@columbia.edu](mailto:dfg2@columbia.edu)

And, please take advantage of our free Study Guides, keyed to each issue of the magazine, at [ajr.org](http://ajr.org) and [cjr.org](http://cjr.org) (under Resources at [cjr.org](http://cjr.org)).

# A Matter of Trust

*A primer on the maelstrom of contemporary media*

BY CAROLYN KELLOGG

**BLUR: HOW TO KNOW WHAT'S TRUE IN the Age of Information Overload** is a book of mixed messages and unfulfilled potential. The authors, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, have more than eighty years in journalism between them. Yet their book is as muddled as it is promising—which shows just how difficult it is to get a good handle on our present moment.

**Blur: How to Know What's True In the Age of Information Overload**  
By Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel  
Bloomsbury USA  
240 pages, \$26

The authors seek to answer two questions. First: How can consumers decide which news sources to trust in the current media landscape? And second: What is the role of the traditional press now, and in the future? What they deliver instead is a comprehensive overview of journalism history, with an eye toward technological evolution, along with contemporary guidelines for reporters and editors.

*Blur* starts out well enough, with a case study of a disaster at a nuclear plant. How does the news break? There are secondhand accounts, amateur videos, revved-up talking heads on cable. The trick, as we soon learn, is that the events took place in 1979, at Three Mile Island (which the authors call “one of the last great domestic emergencies” to predate our current, madly accelerated information cycle).

It is easy to see that the controlled message of thirty years ago would swiftly, um, mushroom today. But after this hypothetical unfolds, the fascinating questions it raises are set aside for a straightforward history lesson. For the most part, this is a didactic book, creating descriptive categories for journalism. The breakdown—“straight news” versus “sense-making news” versus “the journalism of affirmation”—may be useful for journalism students and their professors. Along the way, however, the connection to the average news consumer is lost. Are we likely to hear someone on the bus talking about Glenn Beck's latest salvo as “the journalism of affirmation”?

Indeed, Kovach and Rosenstiel are most effective when addressing news producers rather than news consumers. Their history emphasizes the noble and progressive aspects of journalism, celebrating the reporters who have doggedly sought the truth. They laud the likes of Homer Bigart, Neil Sheehan, and Seymour Hersh. Yet these reporters stand out, we read, because their work exists in pointed contrast to the omissions and missteps of “the press writ large.”

Understanding how good journalism is done may help readers suss out the good from the bad. But if the press writ large gets it wrong, how is the average reader

to get it right? In one striking example, Hersh researches a story about CIA interrogation abuses and can't get a second source to confirm key facts. He decides he can't publish the story. “The story of the story that Seymour Hersh didn't write,” the authors state, is an object lesson in the necessity for verification.

Yet this confusingly conflates the best practices of journalists with the tools available to consumers. A reader can't evaluate a story that wasn't published. The only lesson consumers can take from Hersh's non-published story is the assumption that most published stories have been so scrupulously vetted.

Even when the authors speak specifically to the needs of readers, the results can be spotty. They suggest that trustworthy voices, such as Hersh's, can be a key consumer tool. Yet their short list of such voices includes one journalist over sixty, another who has retired from reporting, still another who spent two years on a single story before taking a break from journalism—and David Halberstam, who died three years ago.

This points to one of the key gaps in *Blur*: at some point, the stories of the past fail to adequately inform the challenges of the present, and the future. While journalists who thrived during the “golden era” of three major television networks and financially sound newspapers share core values with the best journalists of today, they have dramatically different practices. Neil Sheehan got his hands on the Pentagon Papers—but can he take digital photos? Record audio? Build a website?

“With the creative destruction brought by the digital age, the values alone are not enough,” the authors recognize in the last chapter, finally turning to the new realities. News organizations must be reinvented. “This reinvention will come from new places, younger people who understand the technology but adhere to the old values if not the old ways,” they continue. “That may be less our prediction than a profound hope.” It's a plaintive cry, which makes you wonder whether the cherished conception of journalism outlined in *Blur* may be facing its final chapters. **CJR**

CAROLYN KELLOGG covers books and publishing for the Los Angeles Times.

# Reporting Iraq

AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE WAR BY THE JOURNALISTS WHO COVERED IT

EDITED BY MIKE HOYT, JOHN PALATTELLA, AND THE STAFF OF THE  
*COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW*

"Never in the fifty years that I have been in or around the news business have I read a better record of a historic event than this."

—REESE SCHONFELD,  
FOUNDING PRESIDENT, CMW

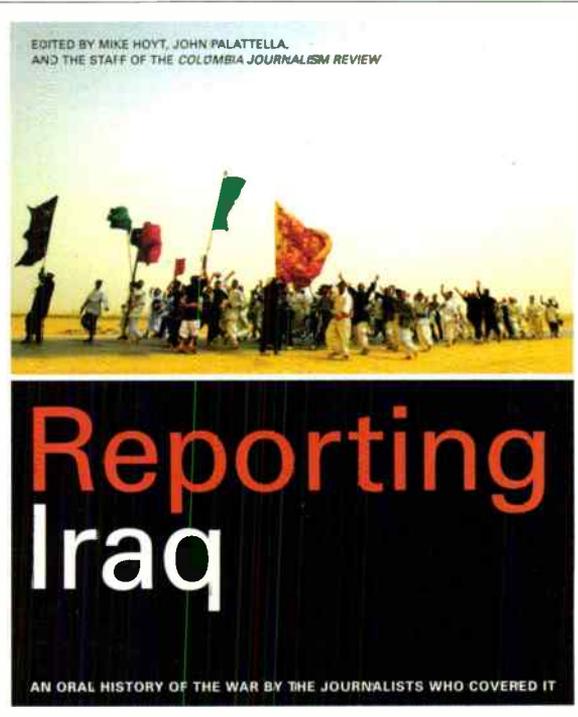
"This should be required reading in every journalism class from high school to graduate school."

—JAMES W. CRAWLEY,  
PRESIDENT, MILITARY  
REPORTERS AND EDITORS

"A searing document, one of the most revealing chronicles of the war yet published. It is as though correspondents are talking late into the night, trying to explain what it was like, what sights and smells haunt them, what they're proud of and what they regret, what they saw coming and what they didn't." —ANTHONY SWOFFORD, *THE WASHINGTON POST*

A new history of the Iraq war and the way it was reported—including contributions from over forty international reporters, photographers, translators, editors and stringers. Rich with anecdote and illustrated with color photographs—including many never before published in U.S. newspapers—*REPORTING IRAQ* is a major event.

Includes 21 Color Photos



HANNAH ALLAM, KNIGHT RIDDER  
CHRISTOPHER ALLBRIFFTON, FREELANCE WRITER  
GHAITH ABDUL-AHAD, *THE GUARDIAN*  
DEBORAH AMOS, NPR  
JON LEE ANDERSON, *THE NEW YORKER*  
JANE ARRAF, CNN  
LUKE BAKER, REUTERS  
ANNE BARNARD, *THE BOSTON GLOBE*  
YOUSIF MOHAMMED BASIL, STRINGER  
JOHN BURNS, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*  
ANDREW LEE BUTTERS, FREELANCE WRITER  
THANASSIS CAMBANIS, *THE BOSTON GLOBE*  
RAJIV CHANDRASEKARAN, *THE WASHINGTON POST*  
PATRICK COCKBURN, *THE INDEPENDENT* (LONDON)  
BORZOU DARAGAH, *LOS ANGELES TIMES*

WILLIAM DARLEY, *MILITARY REVIEW*  
THOMAS DWORZAK, MAGNUM PHOTO  
RICHARD ENGEL, NBC NEWS  
ALI FADHIL, TRANSLATOR  
FARNAZ FASSIHI, *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*  
DEXTER FILKINS, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*  
ANNE GARRELS, NPR  
MARCELA GAVIRIA, FRONTLINE  
PATRICK GRAHAM, FREELANCE WRITER  
CAROLINE HAWLEY, BBC  
JAMES HIDER, *THE TIMES* (LONDON)  
PAUL HOLMES, REUTERS  
CHRIS HONDRCS, GETTY IMAGES  
LARRY KAPLOW, COX NEWSPAPERS  
TOM LASSETER, KNIGHT RIDDER

PETER MAASS, *THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE*  
GEORGES MALBRUNOT, *LE FIGARO*  
DAN MURPHY, *THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR*  
ROBERT NICKELSBURG, *TIME*  
ELIZABETH PALMER, CBS NEWS  
SCOTT PETERSON, *THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR*  
MITCH PROTHERO, UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL  
NIR ROSEN, FREELANCE WRITER  
ALISSA RUBIN, *LOS ANGELES TIMES*  
ANTHONY SHADID, *THE WASHINGTON POST*  
LIZ SLY, *CHICAGO TRIBUNE*  
MARTIN SMITH, FRONTLINE  
VIVIANNE WALT, FREELANCE WRITER  
NANCY YOUSSEF, KNIGHT RIDDER

 MELVILLE HOUSE PUBLISHING [WWW.MHPBOOKS.COM](http://WWW.MHPBOOKS.COM) AVAILABLE WHEREVER BOOKS ARE SOLD

# REQUIRED READING FOR YOUR STUDENTS

*Columbia Journalism Review* brings real-life insights about the complexities of the media world to your journalism and communications students. Published by Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, *CJR* also brings practical advice and inspiration to help young reporters become better at their craft, like how to make their writing more precise and pertinent. No other publication is as committed to encouraging a strong press and developing capable new journalists.



## Sign up for the *CJR* Classroom Program to receive:

- **Discounted subscriptions for your students**  
We have two terms of subscriptions available - **half year (3 issues for \$6.95)**, or **full year (6 issues for \$11.95)** -- each at a significant discount from our general subscription rate.
- **FREE subscription for the teacher**
- **FREE *CJR* Student Study Guide** of each issue that will help you incorporate *CJR* into your classroom discussion and lesson plans. For previous guides see <http://cjr.org/tools/studyguides>.

**COLUMBIA  
JOURNALISM  
REVIEW**

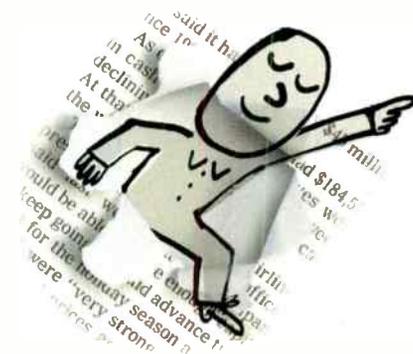
Strong Press, Strong Democracy

**TO ORDER:**  
Visit [cjr.org/classroom](http://cjr.org/classroom)  
Or call 1-888-425-7782

Allow 4-6 weeks for delivery of first issue.

# In ACORN's Shadow

BY MICHAEL SCHUDSON AND JULIA SONNEVEND



REMEMBER ACORN, THE COMMUNITY-organizing group that got caught in the electoral crossfire between one-time community organizer Barack Obama and a highly motivated, conspiracy-minded contingent of conservative activists? The repeated attacks on ACORN for “voter fraud” moved into Sarah Palin’s speeches and inspired John McCain in a televised presidential debate to suggest that ACORN “is now on the verge of maybe perpetrating one of the greatest frauds in voter history in this country, maybe destroying the fabric of democracy.”

**In this column, the authors cull current scholarly writing about journalism for fresh ideas.** Suggestions for possible mention are welcome at [editors@cjr.org](mailto:editors@cjr.org)

The controversy was devastating to ACORN. Foundation funders bailed. Congress cut off support. By last spring, ACORN was gone. And although some ACORN state organizations have reorganized as independent groups, a postmortem is in order.

One question is whether the media gave ACORN its due. In *Perspectives on Politics* (September 2010), a journal of the American Political Science Association, political scientist Peter Dreier and media scholar John Martin answer with a resounding no. They find that the media were taken in all too easily by a very effective group of “opinion entrepreneurs” largely indifferent to facts or fairness.

ACORN began in 1970 as the Arkansas Community Organization for Reform Now. It became a large, ambitious, national advocacy group for and by poor people on a range of issues, particularly housing. After 2000, ACORN took on voter-registration drives, and that’s what led to their fifteen minutes of national notoriety. (For a book-length account of ACORN, see *Seeds of Change* by John Atlas, Vanderbilt University Press, June 2010, a sympathetic, but not uncritical, treatment. Atlas is a longtime housing activist and an associate of Dreier’s.)

For “How ACORN Was Framed,” Dreier and Martin looked at the total corpus of 647 stories on ACORN in fifteen news outlets during 2007 and 2008—*USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, NPR, and PBS—and leading local newspapers in Minneapolis (*Star-Tribune*), Pittsburgh (*Post-Gazette*), and Cleveland (*Plain Dealer*), cities with significant ACORN operations. They found that the national news media were “easily permeated” by conservatives’ anti-ACORN accusations.

The media reported the charges but rarely explained, as Dreier and Martin document in a sprawling indictment, that registration fraud is not voter fraud; that

voter fraud in the U.S. is extremely rare; that ACORN turned in invalid registration forms to comply with state laws, flagging the forms they believed to be fraudulent; that ACORN took steps to reduce invalid registrations their (mostly temporary) workers turned in; and that Republicans were drumming up a “scandal” to discredit candidate Obama. The three local papers were the exceptions. Their familiarity with local ACORN sources led to more balanced and less excitable coverage. As for the national media, in 44 percent of their ACORN voter-registration stories, they provided anti-ACORN accusations without noting any of the relevant context, and in another 31 percent of stories, they mentioned only one of the five most important mitigating facts that Dreier and Martin list.

The media sometimes suspected a gap between Republican allegations and the full story—while CNN’s Drew Griffin kept covering the story for several weeks, repeating conservative charges, by October 17 he summed it up as nothing more than “a sloppy job” of registering voters, quite a distance from an alleged effort to steal the election.

Why so little pushback? Where were the “she said” retorts from ACORN and its friends to the conservatives’ “he said” charges? Atlas suggested to us that there were multiple reasons, including simply that ACORN was an anti-poverty group “always scrambling,” and—strange as it may seem—without a sophisticated communication system for dealing with the media. Meanwhile, ACORN faced internal dissension, especially around the kid-glove handling of Dale Rathke, brother of ACORN’s founder Wade Rathke. Dale had embezzled nearly \$1 million from ACORN in 2000, and Wade arranged for Dale to repay it, but kept this all from the board. In May 2008, ACORN’s board fired Dale and forced out Wade.

ACORN’s danger to democracy was absurdly hyped for partisan advantage; the national media were steamrolled into promoting, in Dreier and Martin’s words, a “disingenuous controversy”; and ACORN twisted in the wind. **CJR**

MICHAEL SCHUDSON teaches at Columbia’s Graduate School of Journalism.

JULIA SONNEVEND is a Ph.D. student in Communications at Columbia.

# The Lower Case

---

**Efforts Meant to Help  
Workers Batter South Africa's  
Poor**

*The New York Times* 9/26/10

**Christine O'Donnell's  
Masturbation Stance**

*ABCnews.com* 9/16/10

---

**Beating Death Becomes Rallying Cry in Egypt**

*The Wall Street Journal* 6/26/10

---

**Butts Arrested in Boob Murder Case**

*WTAJ-TV website* 9/2/10

**SCHOOLS:** Abstinence still focus, parents can opt out

*Asheville (NC) Citizen-Times* 8/8/10

---

**BASEBALL NOTES**

Rangers' Hamilton to  
get shot for sore knee

*Austin American-Statesman* 9/1/10

**Computers for kids  
missing in Iraq**

*The Orange County Register* 8/28/10

---

**Mayor unveils Black homicide plan**

*Defender (Houston, TX)* 1/18-24/09

---

**Public Help Sought in Shooting of Neighborhood Cat**

*KGMI.com* 8/19/10

**Cyclists battling hunger**

*The Times (Trenton, NJ)* 9/11/10

---

CJR offers a one-year subscription or gift subscription for an item published in The Lower Case. Please send original clippings of print items (to CJR, Journalism Building, 2950 Broadway, Columbia Univ., NY, NY 10027) or a link for web items (to [cjr@columbia.edu](mailto:cjr@columbia.edu)). Please include address, phone, and e-mail.

# Parking lot floods when man bursts

*The Herald-Sun, Durham, N.C. 02/04/94*

## EVERYONE MAKES MISTAKES ...

... and this hilarious book of newspaper bloopers has the headlines to prove it! "Correct Me If I'm Wrong" is the uproarious collection of outlandish and unexpected journalistic blunders as seen in CJR and the popular display at the Newseum in Washington, D.C.

collected by Columbia Journalism Review  
edited by Gloria Cooper

\$9.95 plus tax and shipping.  
On sale now in the Newseum Store  
or at [newseum.org](http://newseum.org).



# NEWSEUM

555 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W. | Washington, DC 20001  
[newseum.org](http://newseum.org) | 888/NEWSEUM | Admission free for members.

World Radio History



do not erase

You may not realize it, but by using the name **Kleenex®** as a generic term for tissue, you risk erasing our coveted brand name that we've worked so hard for all these years. **Kleenex®** is a registered trademark and should *always* be followed by a ® and the words 'Brand Tissue'. Just pretend it's in permanent marker.

**Kleenex®**  
BRAND TISSUE



® Registered Trademark of Kimberly Clark Worldwide Inc ©2010 KCWW

World Radio History