

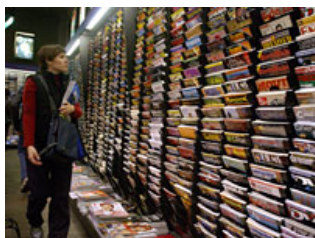
HOME / THE SPECTATOR : SCRUTINIZING CULTURE.

Magazines, Bring Back the Write-Around!

Regain your dignity with this secret weapon.

By Ron Rosenbaum | Posted Thursday, Oct. 4, 2007, at 10:54 AM ET

0 Like 0



How to save magazine journalism

Don't get me wrong, I love magazines. I've written for a wide range of them, from *Punk* to *The New Yorker*. They are—or were—a great American phenomenon. But magazines, many of them anyway, are now slowly killing themselves, killing their credibility, by turning into fawning fools for access.

Recently I addressed a root cause of this, the creeping sickness that is [the celebrity profile](#), the way in which so many once-respected magazines have ceded their integrity to celebrities, and more specifically to control-

obsessed celebrity handlers who skillfully wield the promise of "access" (which usually, in this debased form, means a half-hour of carefully monitored, virtually pre-scripted, mostly trivial if not addled chat, recorded by a writer who often requires pre-approval for pliancy, accompanied by an "exclusive" cover shot that must be pre-approved by the celeb, taken by a photographer who often needs pre-approval too).

Advertisement

The cult of the cover shot—think fast: When was the last time you learned *anything* from one?—is particularly pernicious and sad because it's a sign that most magazines have lost the ability to find and give cover treatment to stories that don't feature a famous face. But the recent Bill and Hillary tag-team mag-control operation—and *GQ*'s craven cave-in to it—suggests that the contagion, the plague of fawning-for-access journalism, has now spread to politics, with Bill and Hillary playing the role of Brad and Angelina.

It's deeply depressing, but I think I've come up with a possible solution. A counterweapon, a way for magazines to rise up from the bended knee they offer to the publicity industrial-complex.

I'll get to my solution—well, suggestion—in a moment, but first let me fill you in on the Clinton-*GQ* dustup.

The quick story is this: *GQ* commissioned Joshua Green, a serious political reporter on the staff of the *Atlantic*, to do a piece on infighting within Hillary Clinton's campaign. I guess they wanted *Politico*-type insider street cred. Instead, they threw away whatever cred they had. And ended up in a scandal first reported by *Politico*.

Free Shipping

FREE \$10 Gift Card with \$50 Purchase

Click to shop L.L.Bean



How the Nation's Other



Are Pedophiles Really

Green was a good choice: He knew the turf, having written a much-admired cover story on Hillary for the *Atlantic* last winter. But in the course of reporting, Green had dinner with a Hillary mouthpiece. Next thing we know, one of *Bill Clinton's* aides is in the *GQ* editor's office telling him there'd be a "problem" with granting access to Bill Clinton for *GQ's* "Man of the Year" issue if *GQ* ran a muckraking Hillary story.

Of course, any editor with a backbone would say, "Thank you, your crude effort to kill this story will be included in the story. Goodbye."

Instead, the *GQ* editor killed the story. Profile in courage!

What is even more reprehensible is that *GQ's* editor then began to claim—in a cringe-inducing, unconvincing way—that the visit by a Clinton *consigliere* had nothing to do with his killing the piece. Instead, unforgivably, he turned on his own reporter and in a spectacularly demeaning way suddenly claimed there were "problems" with the story unrelated to Clintonian pressure.

Here's what reporter Joshua Green told [Howard Kurtz of the Washington Post](#): "*GQ* told me it was a great story and a hell of a reporting job, but they didn't want to jeopardize their Clinton-in-Africa piece. *GQ* told me the Clintons were unhappy and threatened to revoke access to Bill Clinton if the Hillary story ran."

And here's what *GQ* editor Jim Nelson said: "[T]he story didn't end up fully satisfying. ... I guarantee and promise you, if I'd have had a great Hillary piece, I would have run it." He added that there was no connection between the two Clinton stories.

Who do you think is telling the truth here, and who is shamefully prevaricating? I know who I believe.

I'd like to emphasize that my disgust with this comes not from any anti-Clinton bias. I've actually *endorsed* Hillary Clinton (months ago, in another publication). While this incident might cause me to reconsider, I think the Clintons have the right to exercise as much control as they can. That's politics. But editors have the obligation to resist them. That's journalism. Or used to be. It's more the magazine editor's spinelessness than the Clintons' attempt at control that makes the skin crawl.

For one thing, it won't be just an isolated incident. It will send a signal to politicians that magazine editors are whores for access who can be rolled at will. And then there's the intangible cost: the cost of such behavior to whatever respect is left for the magazine industry from a public that increasingly thinks the mainstream media are in the pocket of the powerful.

It's time for magazine editors to fight this censorship-by-access. Because it's really self-censorship: the false belief that one can't run a probing story just because one is denied the anodyne "exclusive" quotes and the super-special "exclusive" photo of the powerful subject reclining on his or her patio.

And I believe there is at least one rarely used, rusty weapon at magazine editors' command: the unjustly disdained "write-around."

The *write-around*: It's a term of art in the mag trade, mostly used derisively, and it refers to a story done about a person without that person's cooperation, and thus, in contemporary terms, without the usual perks one gets in exchange for the fawning profile.

It's a little sad and unfair the way the write-around is spoken of so disdainfully. I'm not talking about the celeb-rag write-around, where quotes from unnamed "insiders" purport to tell us the truth about Brad and Angelina's marriage. (Although—let's face it—are these quotes any less reliable than the self-serving quotes that Angelina Jolie herself gave to an *Esquire* reporter for its cover story on her? The ones that portrayed her as a suffering saint, crucified on the cross of fame to save humanity?)

No, I'm talking about stories that involve serious subjects, profiles of people with public and private power. There is a general—and erroneous—sense that with such a subject, a write-around is a cop-out; a kind of head-fake by a reporter who doesn't have sufficient talent or clout to land the crucial interview. But I'd argue that a write-around can be more revealing

Occupy Camps Are Responding to the Chaos in New York



Manjoo: Serious Gamers Hate Call of Duty. I Love It. Here's Why.

the Most Hated Prison Inmates?



Fifty Years of *West Side Story* Spoofs

Slate [Slate.com on Facebook](#)
Like 165,124

[Login](#) You need to be logged into Facebook to see your friends' recent activity.



Alternative rock radio: The sad, unwarranted decline of FM rock stations.
1,228 people recommend this.



Gabrielle Giffords' recovery on video: How the brain reconstructs itself.
440 people recommend this.



Spencer Bachus, Rogue Trader

[View My Network on Slate >>](#)



PHOTOS



CARTOONS



DOONESBURY

1. Casey Anthony: The Prosecutor Asks Us To Ignore Her During His Casey Anthony Book Tour

By Candace Dempsey | November 15, 2011



2. Are Child Molesters Really the Most Hated People in Prison?

By Brian Palmer | November 15, 2011



3. The Best Live Albums: From Axl to Zeppelin.

By Bill Wyman | November 16, 2011

and truthful than a piece written with the cooperation of the subject.

For one thing, it's hard to underestimate how media-savvy people in power have become, how unlikely it is, even if you do get access, that you'll get anything that's not pre-scripted and self-serving. You rarely see an unguarded moment, and seldom is heard an unrehearsed word.

For another, there's this thing that used to be called "investigative reporting." A practice that the cult of access has undermined and marginalized, at least among the glossy magazines. It's journalism that trades the in-home tour for a rigorous scrutiny of the balance sheet and the SEC filings.

Even the celebrity profile can be transformed with write-around investigative reporting. Consider that the story some call the greatest magazine story ever written, Gay Talese's classic "[Frank Sinatra Has a Cold](#)," was a write-around. Talese painted a portrait of Sinatra from the outside, spending long, tedious hours with his flunkies and hangers-on, capturing the ripples and crosscurrents of influence and ego among the nine circles of sycophants who surrounded him that cumulatively told a story of raw power.

Access itself is not all it's cracked up to be. There's the journalistic equivalent of Stockholm syndrome. I know, I've suffered from it. I find it hard to be as cutting, or even as critical, as I really feel about people who allow me to enter their zone of privacy. I blame my parents for teaching me manners—the best investigative journalists don't have the best manners. The best investigative reporters might be called "sociopaths for truth." I think you know the type I'm talking about. And the very best of these are often good at faking empathy and then coldly eviscerating the empathized-with one.

Some writers are built this way, happy to sacrifice the person for the story. But not enough anymore! Janet Malcolm famously wrote (in the opening of *The Journalist and the Murderer*) about the way writers gain the trust of their subjects and end up "betraying them without remorse." It may have been true when she published the book, in 1990, but is it now? It sounds cold, but not *enough* reporters and writers are willing to betray or even alienate their subjects. If they do, they risk being denied access to other subjects. They're no longer part of the club.

I'm not saying the measure of a story is how much it offends the subject. I've occasionally taught writing classes on long-form nonfiction, with smart kids at Columbia, NYU, Chicago—and sensitive, too. They often raise questions about the ethical issues, the emotional impact of writing critically about subjects.

And I suggest that there might be different rules for subjects who are and aren't media-savvy and/or powerful. You almost want to protect the media-naïve from themselves because it almost feels like stealing when they say something damning that you know will make a great pull quote.

But with the media-savvy and the powerful, one can't be paralyzed by worry about hurt feelings. *They* rarely are. And anyway, with such subjects the interview is often a phony game, both parties parrying to elicit or avoid or shape the pull quote while giving the sense that *confidences* are being exchanged. (One of the few exceptions is the extended *Paris Review*-type interview, which is done with the cooperation of writers and artists, but they don't have quite the same kind of power or world-shaking secrets as presidential candidates or CEOs.)

One solution might be for magazines to divide up reporting on powerful profile subjects between sociopathic investigators who are not permitted contact with the subject and empathetic interviewers who weasel out some thing dubiously "personal." If the profile subjects knew there were serious investigators out there at large, on their trail, building a potential write-around, they might be more willing to talk—and be forthcoming—in person.

Another solution may be to reconsider the artificiality and overpopularity of the profile form itself. Profiles can often be fraudulent constructs that attempt to turn several encounters between strangers into a narrative about the famous one's life, usually forcing it into an artificial dramatic arc.

My favorite magazine stories these days are rarely profiles. Indeed, my favorite magazine



4. The Mouse Trap: Can One Lab Animal Cure Every Disease?

By Daniel Engber | November 16, 2011



5. The Brainless, Stupid, Visceral Joy of Modern Warfare

By Farhad Manjoo | November 15, 2011

Slate
iPHONE APP 2.0

DOWNLOAD NOW

Available on the App Store

The Washington Post HIGHLIGHTS



Sandusky says he's innocent

[Human stem cell trial discontinued](#)

[Farmers explore tobacco's nice side](#)

[Is Libya Cain's 'oops' moment?](#)

THE ROOT

- [CPS Fails to Close Achievement Gap with Reforms](#)
- [Former Red Sox Manager Molested 12 African-American Boys](#)
- [Daily Job Lead: Public Relations Consultant](#)

FOREIGN POLICY

- [How Class Warfare Could Make Us All Richer](#)
- [10 Reasons Why Obama Will Win](#)
- [Touring Hezbollah's Secret War Bunkers](#)

Enter your e-mail address.

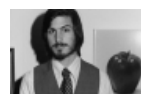
MORE THE SPECTATOR COLUMNS



10 Things I Hate About Anonymous

And the stupid Shakespearean birther cult behind it.

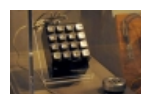
Ron Rosenbaum | October 27, 2011



Steve Jobs and Me

He said my 1971 article inspired him. His iBook obsessed me.

Ron Rosenbaum | October 7, 2011



"Secrets of the Little Blue Box"

The 1971 article about phone hacking that inspired Steve Jobs.

Ron Rosenbaum | October 7, 2011

piece in recent memory is David Foster Wallace's saga of his trip on a cruise ship: "Shipping Out." (First published in *Harper's*; retitled in book form as "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again.") He took what seemed to be a mundane subject and by spending an extended period of time with nonfamous people "having fun" managed to raise provocative philosophical questions about American life, about the meaning of life, in a hilarious, utterly idiosyncratic, and memorable way.

And it's not as if magazines have completely given up on investigative reporting; let me mention—to be fair to a magazine whose cover profile I've ridiculed—a great recent nonprofile: *Esquire's* [impressive investigative piece](#) about NBC Dateline's *To Catch a Predator* series (by Luke Dittrich) that is deeply disturbing and important on a number of levels. *

But given the cover appeal of the famous and the powerful, magazines will continue to assign profiles. The problem is that the spread of Hollywood access rules has blurred the line and blunted the journalism when it comes to profiles of people in power in politics and government, or people with private corporate power. In such cases, the willingness to do an investigative write-around can become not an evasion but a powerful weapon of deterrence.

I'm not saying that write-arounds are never done—but they are rare and they get talked about for their rarity. Consider the recent [New York magazine profile of Matt Drudge](#) by Philip Weiss. It was, I thought, a revealing—not unsympathetic—portrait of a lonely guy with great power that was done without any access to Drudge himself.

I've read a lot about Drudge, but I felt this write-around captured something about who he is and what he does and how they're linked in a way I hadn't seen before. In some online discussions I heard this piece derisively referred to as "a write-around," but to me it was an encouraging straw in the wind. It was smart and it wasn't lazy. Weiss did a lot of legwork, talked to people with surprising takes (Camille Paglia), and filled in the space surrounding Drudge so well that one had a portrait of him in the silhouette drawn around him.

I highlight the Weiss/Drudge piece because this was a clear *statement* by a major magazine. It's true that the better magazines are often not satisfied with the perfunctory sit-down and will pair such an interview with considerable reporting. And some, like *New York*, will attempt a pure write-around like this one. But more should follow suit. If more magazines and magazine editors were unafraid to do a write-around, the balance of power might shift a bit.

Powerful figures who now think they can avoid thoroughgoing scrutiny by journalists just by withholding their participation might become a little concerned that magazines might then decide to hire more energetic and investigative-minded reporters (the sociopaths of doom) to look more deeply into their record than those who lazily settle for unexamined explanations and equivocations in person. And a write-around would of course inform the reader that the subject is afraid of facing a nonsycophantic reporter, may indeed have something to hide, questions he or she doesn't want raised.

I'm not saying journalism is war, but it's often a struggle between those with power who want to avoid or control scrutiny and those who feel scrutiny of the powerful is a public service.

And you editors out there. Don't be so attached to having a big shiny famous head on your cover. Don't be afraid to use stock photos: A well-chosen black-and-white stock photo can give a cover subject a something-to-hide, caught-in-the-act look that can be far more dramatic and revealing (and often truthful) than the big shiny exclusive photo head.

Or bring back the caricature. If you want your big head, use an illustration. For instance, the threat of a caricature by Drew Friedman, the Thomas Nast of our time, should be enough to bring these vain creatures to heel.

For a long time now, journalists and their editors have had no defenses against the blackmail of access. The threat of an investigative write-around may provide a long-overdue way of restoring the dignity and value of magazine profiles.

Correction, Oct. 5, 2007: *This piece originally stated that To Catch a Predator aired on ABC. It aired on NBC. (Return to the corrected sentence.)*

[VIEW OUR COMPLETE THE SPECTATOR ARCHIVE](#)

FROM AROUND THE WEB

- [7 Phone Apps You Don't Want Your Boyfriend To Have](#) (*MadameNoire*)
- [I \(Almost\) Got Away With It: The Party Girl Gone Bad](#) (*Discovery Channel Videos*)
- [6 Ways to Get What You Want](#) (*Life and Beauty Weekly*)
- [Miami Swim Week Presents Bathing Suits You Can't Actually Swim In](#) (*The Cut*)
- [Doomsday Scenario Shaping Up in Iran Nuke Crisis?](#) (*FoxNews.com*)

