The Journalism School
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Elusive Story, Unwitting Source: The *Chicago Tribune* Examines "No Child Left Behind" Teaching Note

Case Summary

To the outside observer, journalists spend much of their time alone researching, reporting, and writing. In reality, most are engaged in ongoing partnerships, with editors and colleagues but also with sources—the people who lend information, anecdotes, and experiential authority to the news. The crucial connection between journalist and subject, however, can be fraught, as both sides struggle with unclear boundaries and unwritten rules.

This case focuses on *Chicago Tribune* education reporter Stephanie Banchero, who in the fall of 2003 embarked on a story that brought her into close and complex contact with two sources—a mother and daughter whom she met researching No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Banchero wanted to focus on the effects of the controversial 2001 legislation, especially its "choice provision" that let students relocate to better schools. Embarking on what she thought would be a year-long project, she planned to follow Rayola Carwell, a smart yet underprivileged third-grader who was moving schools and seemed like a perfect test case of the new law's performance. Banchero hoped to land a long-form, narrative story that put a human face on education policy and the question of whether NCLB could help a good student. But the reporter soon found that she needed a new approach as Rayola's school record faltered, and her mother Yolanda emerged as an increasingly important and troubling part of the story.

Students follow Banchero as her article evolves from a relatively tidy story of one girl's experience in a new school into a complex piece, not only about NCLB but also family environment and poverty. At the same time, students track Banchero's relationship with her editors, who as they become more interested and engaged in the project, begin to challenge Banchero's ethics and initial assumptions about the story and her responsibilities to her sources.

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Teaching Objectives

Use the case as a vehicle for discussing education reporting, the relationship of journalists with their sources, whether and how journalists should intervene in the lives of sources, and the mutual responsibilities of both parties. Also use the case as a platform for considering long-form journalism--its similarities with and differences from everyday reporting, and how to balance one with the other.

It took time for Banchero to "get into the lives" of her subjects, whom she followed primarily on her own time. Was this reasonable for Banchero to do? Reporting for months outside normal work hours is unfeasible for many journalists, especially those with personal constraints or newsroom limitations. Discuss how this impacts the development of long-form stories, and strategies and approaches that journalists can use to get the most out of the situations that they encounter.

In the course of shadowing Rayola, Banchero often witnesses signs of sub-par parental performance, including Yolanda's failure to wake the kids up on time for breakfast and school. But Banchero does not step in, even though she could. She also turns down Yolanda's requests for grocery money and occasional help transporting the children. Discuss Banchero's decision not to intervene and, by extension, whether journalists should ever intercede in the lives of their subjects. If so, when and to what extent? Finally, should journalists disclose their involvement in the story that they eventually write?

All journalists must strike a balance between going into a story with a pre-existing thesis, and remaining open to adapting that original vision as reporting progresses. Banchero becomes frustrated with Ms. Carwell, an impulsive and untrustworthy subject, who complicates the story by placing Rayola in a failing school. Consider how developed a story must be in the pitch and early reporting phases. Likewise, how much reporting should be completed before the story begins to take its final shape? Also discuss the challenges of remaining focused yet flexible as circumstances change and new information rolls in during a story's life span.

Another theme of the case is journalistic responsibility to sources. Banchero spends months with Carwell, always with her reporting notebook in full view, but is "pretty sure" that the mother does not understand that her comments are on the record unless stated otherwise. By not making the rules of the reporting game clear, Banchero is concerned that she took advantage of Carwell's lack of media savvy. Did she? Discuss this and similar questions as part of a broader conversation about what journalists owe their subjects. Also note disclosure strategies that are in the interests of all parties.

Class Plan

Use this case in a course or class about education reporting; long-form, human interest journalism; reporting techniques and story planning; or journalist-source interactions and responsibilities.

Pre-class. Help students prepare for class by assigning the following question:

1. Was Banchero dishonest with her source? Justify your response.

We found it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The posts also highlight talking points ahead of the class, and identify specific students to call upon during the discussion.

In-class questions. The online blog posts are a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions to promote an 80-90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

a) Banchero sends a story memo before the start of the 2003-2004 school year explaining her idea of tracking a student for a year, but fails to draw the interest of her editors. She acknowledges that she has a "grand plan" but is unsure of what she will find. How could her pitch have been better developed at this early stage?

b) Banchero doesn't want "too many parameters" when choosing a child to follow, and tries to look for an "average to good student, where, if she could just get into a good school, it would work." To find this student, she turns up at an above average local elementary school on the semester's first day and starts screening pupils. What do you think of this strategy? What about her search criteria? Should they have been different in any way? How else might she have found a subject for her story?

c) Even when Banchero finds her subject, Rayola Carwell, she admits to going into the story "blind." Some might argue that this forced her to keep an open mind, while others could say that a better sense of goals would have been more helpful. What do you think?

d) On Rayola's first day at Stockton Elementary, Banchero watches as Carwell admits to school officials that her daughter had flunked third grade, mostly due to absenteeism, and was not in the fourth grade as she had told them. Should this have prompted Banchero to think twice about using Rayola as a subject, and her mother as a source?

e) Rayola's progress wanes as the school year progresses. Banchero sees that she is often sleep-deprived and hungry, and realizes from sitting outside the family home that the Carwell children often do not make it to school. Should Banchero have intervened, and if so, in what ways and to what extent?

f) As Rayola misses an increasing amount of school, Banchero realizes that her test case of NCLB's "choice provision" is evaporating. Carwell, she begins to realize, is an added complication and a potential cause of her child's problems at school. Should Banchero have moved on to a different family as this point? Discuss when to stick with or abandon a story.

g) Banchero's decision to focus on just one child means she has no alternative character to fall back on when her story beings to disintegrate. Did she make a mistake in just following Rayola, or was her initial decision justified?

h) Banchero, who had not planned to focus on Ms. Carwell, is horrified when her editors ask her to do so, starting with a background check. She thinks following Carwell is a "waste of time," and can't see how the public is served by doing this type of reporting. She also does not see the point of pressing the mother on her chaotic home life. Do you agree with her views, or are her editors correct in reframing the story?

i) Banchero failed to mention to Carwell at the start of her reporting that the mother could appear in the story. She also tells herself that Carwell "should have known" that she might ultimately be a character. Did Carwell have a responsibility to understand the journalistic rules and conventions to which she had voluntarily submitted herself? Or was the responsibility all Banchero's?

j) What options does Banchero have to remedy the situation? If she decides to tell Carwell about the story's new focus, how should she do it? Should she "reverse course" and use Carwell-related material that she's already gathered, or is that material invalid? Should she abandon it and start anew, assuming the mother agrees? Does she need Carwell's cooperation at all, given that she has secured independent access to Rayola's school?

l) Banchero refrained from telling Carwell what she thought of her for two reasons: to preserve her access to Rayola, and because of the journalistic code to stay out of the story. Was this decision justified? Or was it disingenuous and possibly harmful, especially given that the welfare of children was involved?

Suggested Readings

Robert S. Boynton, *The New New Journalism: Conversations with America's Best Nonfiction Writers on Their Craft*, New York: Vintage Books, 2005.

SYNOPSIS: A number of writers who have "been quietly securing a place at the very center of contemporary American literature for reportorially based, narrative-driven long form nonfiction" discuss their techniques and philosophy for how one "gets the story," including innovative immersion techniques (Ted Conover) and extending the time they've spent reporting (Adrian LeBlanc). The book provides useful examples for students as they consider Banchero's reporting, and strategies for effective long-form journalism.

Martin Gottlieb, "Dangerous Liaisons: Journalists and Their Sources," *Columbia Journalism Review*, 1989, Vol. 28, Issue 2, 21.

SYNOPSIS: In the article, Gottlieb interviews a number of well-known journalists about their reactions to Janet Malcolm's articles (see below), including David Halberstam, Mike Wallace, and Barbara Walters. The responses run the gamut from agreement to outraged rejection of her argument that all journalists feign sympathy for their subjects in order to steal their stories.

Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

SYNOPSIS: In this book, elaborated from two articles that appeared in the *New Yorker* on the same subject, Malcolm examines the relationship between journalists and their sources. She focuses on one particular example—that of convicted murderer Jeffrey MacDonald who successfully sued journalist Joe McGinnis for fraud and breach of contract after the writer befriended the former doctor and wrote a book that portrayed him as a pathological liar and cold-blooded killer. Malcolm controversially argues that the journalist-subject relationship is always one of seduction and betrayal, and that "every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible."

See also: Joe McGinniss, *Fatal Vision,* New York: New American Library, 1984, which was later made into a television mini-series and tells the story of Green Beret doctor Jeffrey MacDonald, who was convicted of the murder of his pregnant wife and two daughters in 1979. McGinnis was given special access to the defense team, and even lived during the trial with MacDonald. Although the doctor expected to be portrayed as innocent, the opposite occurred: McGinnis painted his subject as a heartless murderer who killed his family in a rage after taking amphetamines.

Rachel Smolkin, "Off the Sidelines," *American Journalism Review*, December/January 2006.

SYNOPSIS: This article, written after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 when "many journalists jettisoned their detached-observer status," asks: "When should reporters intervene, and where is the line between humanitarian assistance and unacceptable activism?" The author interviews several journalists and ethicists, who have a range of responses, including being "deeply conflicted" about when to step in, to being "perfectly comfortable" with rendering any assistance possible after the hurricane. While the article is specific to a particular event, its larger themes are applicable to the case study, and questions as to whether Banchero should have intervened in the lives of Yolanda Carwell and her children.

http://www.ajr.org/Article.asp?id=3999