



But is it News?
The *New York Times* and the International Freedom Center
Teaching Note

Case Summary

In the US, there has long smoldered what sociologists call a “culture war” between conservatives and liberals. To some degree, the differences between them are captured by political parties and emerge with particular vigor during election seasons. But some issues—abortion, religion, evolution, and guns—have long triggered irreconcilable responses from each side of the debate regardless of the electoral cycle. As a rule, conservatives favor individual freedom from government and the presence of religion in public life; liberals favor government intervention to level society’s unequal playing field, and regard religion as a private matter.

Culture war issues are by definition tricky for news organizations to cover. The very language of the debate is loaded. Advocates on both sides frequently charge that reporters are biased. But a particular challenge for editors is deciding whether coverage is even merited, especially when it seems clear that a skirmish has been designed specifically to attract media attention and promote the agenda of the provocative party.

This case examines one such challenge through the eyes of editors at the *New York Times*. In June 2005 Debra Burlingame, the bereaved sister of the pilot of the plane that was crashed into the Pentagon on 9/11, published an opinion piece in the *Wall Street Journal*. In it, she argued against the creation of the International Freedom Center (IFC), a planned museum at Ground Zero dedicated to freedom struggles the world over. Several competing interests—among them government, a private leaseholder, and families of the 9/11 victims—had already staked claims to the site’s future. But Burlingame did not write the op-ed simply to introduce another voice into a routine discussion over land use and architecture. Rather, she hoped to kill the project outright.

Burlingame claimed that the proposed IFC failed to respect the memories of those killed on 9/11 by focusing on worldwide struggles for freedom from oppression, rather than explicitly on

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the 9/11 victims themselves. She suggested that such a museum would impugn the US's own military actions abroad, and risked justifying terrorism. The nation was already deeply polarized over foreign policy, the wisdom of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and fresh allegations that US soldiers had tortured prisoners. Burlingame argued that the IFC was the embodiment of a dangerously mistaken liberal critique of US foreign policy in wartime. She called the museum's supporters "ideologues hoping to use the memorial site as nothing more than a powerful visual aid to promote their agenda," and the IFC itself an "insult" constructed on the very ground "where heroes died."

The debate over the future of Ground Zero was already years old, but Burlingame had suddenly changed the terms. With her piece, she had opened a new front in an ongoing cultural battle. Moreover, she had done so in a manner that seemed calculated to win publicity. A number of local media seemed happy to oblige with stories about the controversy Burlingame ignited; members of the conservative blogosphere followed, and then the right-leaning Fox News Channel. Each additional story amplified Burlingame's claim to represent bereaved 9/11 families against unpatriotic elitists.

But at the *New York Times*, which called itself the national "paper of record" in addition to New York City's local paper, the merits of the story were not so clear. Students will adopt the perspective of *Times* editors in considering whether Burlingame's piece and its aftermath warrants coverage. In doing so, they must consider to what degree the press is complicit in culture war battles. Does coverage alone feed the flames of discord and thus constitute a kind of victory for the instigator of conflict? Is it the job of the media to give publicity seekers what they want? On the other hand, is it the media's responsibility to screen such voices for credibility? Does the decision to cover or not to cover itself represent an implicit taking of sides?

Teaching Objectives

This case requires students to forge a complicated set of judgments and examine their own biases about the nature of news itself. The case can prompt discussion about the extent to which interested parties should be allowed to drive a news organization's agenda. How do journalists frame cultural debates? How should they? On the one hand, battles in the culture war are clearly "news" insofar as they represent issues about which readers want information. On the other hand, does a newspaper undermine its public service function if coverage inflames a dispute and impedes reconciliation?

Implicit in these questions is a judgment about what standard an event or issue should meet to be considered news in the first place. Notice that students will tend to focus on conflict as the story. Ask them to question that assumption. Is there anything else going on here? Is conflict what makes this story "news"? What does one's answer say about news more generally?

The case also touches on questions of how competition affects coverage decisions. If *Times* editors decide Burlingame's op-ed is not a story, should it revisit that decision after the *New York Post* has covered it? What about after Fox News Channel has covered it? The *Times* has responsibilities to both a local and a national audience. Students can examine at what point a local story achieves national significance—and whether other national media, possibly with their own agendas, should be the arbiters of this question.

In addition, the case opens up questions about monuments as public goods—and about which “public” monuments should serve, how competing interests stake claims, and how journalists should cover those claims. Art, politics, and culture mutually shape one another, and in the US, this process has been particularly fraught where memorials are concerned. Interested parties frequently argue that memorials should “leave politics out” and simply honor the dead; in this case, each side accuses the other of injecting politics into the debate over the future of Ground Zero. How should journalists enter this fray? Is the story of the proposed memorial primarily political?

Class Plan

Use this case in a class about editorial decision-making and news judgment; about art and culture reporting; or about covering trauma and its aftermath.

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

- 1) Is there a story here? If so, what is the headline?

We found it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to the questions in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The instructor can use the students' work both to craft talking points ahead of class, and to identify particular students to call upon during the discussion.

In-class questions. The homework assignment is a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions in order 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) Identify the “sides” to this story. Do bereaved 9/11 family members represent one side, or several?

- b) The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, which oversees development at Ground Zero, notifies its Family Advisory board in May 2005 about plans for the IFC. Monika Iken, whose husband died in the attacks on the World Trade Center, expresses concern that “[The IFC is] encroaching on our memorial. Our memorial needs to stand alone.” To whom does the memorial belong? How should the press cover the debate over how the space gets used?
- c) Burlingame’s June 7, 2005 *Wall Street Journal* op-ed claims: “The IFC’s list of those who are shaping or influencing the programming for their Ground Zero exhibit includes a Who’s Who of the human rights, Guantanamo-obsessed world.” Is this charge valid? How would a reporter find out?
- d) Assess the relevance of the fact that Burlingame lost her brother in the 9/11 attacks. To what extent does she represent other bereaved family members? Are her objections to the IFC more newsworthy because of her loss? Should the press care that IFC President Tofel, the organization’s public face, did not lose a family member in the 9/11 attacks?
- e) Burlingame and her allies urge IFC board members to respect the victims of 9/11; Tofel and his allies insist that the IFC will do so. What does each side mean by the politically charged phrase “respecting the victims?” Does either definition carry more weight? Is it the job of the press to find an answer?
- f) Assess how the *New York Post*, *Newsday*, and Fox News Channel covered this story. What does balanced, “he said/she said”-style reporting illuminate? What does it obscure? Why do you think the *New York Daily News* has so far avoided the controversy?
- g) Should the *New York Times* write a story? What is the headline?

Suggested Readings

Paul Goldberger, *Up From Zero: Politics, Architecture and the Rebuilding of New York*, New York: Random House, 2004.

SYNOPSIS: With this book, *New Yorker* architecture critic Paul Goldberger plunges readers into the legal and bureaucratic thicket surrounding the development of the World Trade Center site. Even the question of ownership proves surprisingly complicated. Though the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey owned the land, the twin towers themselves had been leased to real estate mogul Larry Silverstein weeks before the attacks. Goldberger casts his as a tale of the “conflicting forces that swirled around ground zero... power, money, and architecture and planning.”

First chapter available at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/12/books/chapters/0912-1st-goldberger.html>

Andreas Huyssen, Chapters 1, "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia" and 10, "Twin Memories: Afterimages of Nine/Eleven," in *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003.

SYNOPSIS: This collection of essays is a more abstract look at the urge to memorialize as an antidote to the impermanence and dislocation of modern life. Though at times a bit specialized and abstruse in its discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of certain architectural movements, the book provocatively questions a "culture of memory" that the author finds problematic. It looks at the "objective problems of representing and memorializing traumatic events in built space" and asks: "How should... local, regional, or national memories be secured, structured, and represented?"

Robert Kolker, "The Grief Police," *New York Magazine*, July 24 2004.

SYNOPSIS: This piece offers additional background on the organization Take Back the Memorial, as well as 9/11 family members who became activists and advocates. The article examines the competing claims of several stakeholders in Ground Zero. It also describes some of the personalities involved, from leaseholder Larry Silverstein to former Mayor Rudy Giuliani.

<http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/sept11/features/15140/>

Michael Sorkin, "Bring it On: In Search of Democracy at Ground Zero," *Slate*, January 15, 2003.

SYNOPSIS: This trenchant critique of the development process at Ground Zero offers a glimpse into the peculiar mechanics of planning at the site. Sorkin argues that the process was opaque and exclusive and would have benefited from greater public involvement. In his view: "It is crucial to recognize that Sept. 11 was an *event*; it happened to all of us, not to buildings or businesses or an area downtown. The extraordinariness of this fact must be acknowledged by what gets done at Ground Zero. The process of deciding becomes, in this instance, far more important than the efficiency, profitability, or even the aesthetics of whatever is finally built."

<http://slate.msn.com/id/2077010/>

Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (eds.), *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, New York: New York University Press, 1999.

SYNOPSIS: This anthology deals with the so-called “culture wars,” particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, and explores the way visual art of the period ignited and commented upon political conflict. The collection poses similar questions to those that arise in the debate over the World Trade Center memorial, namely whose values should define shared visual space. In particular, the essays “Too Political? Forget It” and “Homophobia at the NEA” can expose students to previous cultural battles over art—with the added complication of government funding—and inform their thinking on the role journalists should play in such debates.

Other Resources

Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision, 1994 (Documentary film), dir. Frieda Mock.

SYNOPSIS: This documentary details the career of Maya Lin, who designed the Vietnam War memorial as an undergraduate at Yale. Though widely well-regarded today, the memorial was the subject of intense controversy when Lin first proposed her design. The documentary illustrates how another debate over the purpose and meaning of a memorial played out. It also touches on questions about patriotism that reappeared in the debate over the IFC.