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Editor's Reflection

Business as Usual

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It's hard to describe post-communist Bulgaria in 1995, its streets drab and its people eager, and myself as an uninspired student of international business. I recall being cold and worried often, yet at times strikingly optimistic about the future. When a friend showed me an ad for a part-time financial reporter, I thought it was a long shot. Who would hire a college junior with no writing experience and a diploma from a math-intensive high school? But I called just in case. The news agency hired me. Go figure!

I think now what got me the job was my short skirt. But at the time, I preferred to believe that I represented an ideological *tabula rasa*, unlike older journalists who had worked under the communist regime. This was a private news agency seeking a clean start. The rest of the reporters, also young women, left or were fired often. Hardly anyone could keep up with the hours and the workload for more than a few weeks or months.

I was assigned to cover the country's banking system, and my main source (who was secretly being paid by the news agency) was the adviser to the director of the Bulgarian central bank. It set the country's interest rates and regulated banks, including by lending them money, much as the Fed does. In the early 1990s, private banks had sprung up like mushrooms, tacitly supported by old-regime power figures or by connections to organized crime. Unlike the behemoth state bank, the newfangled creations were often in trouble, especially in those years of severe political and economic instability. My source regularly reported which banks had exceeded the overdraft limits set by the central bank, and I dutifully wrote all he said.

One bank appeared to be in particularly deep trouble, frequently exceeding its overdraft. National newspapers picked up my stories, and I started to see paragraphs I had written appear as part of their articles. Day by day, people began to line up in front of the troubled bank's offices to withdraw their money. Eventually, the bank folded.

Even if you are a 19-year-old, in a small Balkan country, who has never taken a journalism class, you realize something is wrong with this picture. You realize you contributed to an outcome to which you had no right to contribute. You realize your power, which you have in no way earned. You begin to understand the media system as a vortex that subtly spins people's lives, leading them to see the world in ways that are simplistic at best and patently inaccurate at worst. And you ask yourself: Is there a better way?

This is precisely the question at the heart of this issue's articles, which focus on some of the simplistic or stereotypical depictions that dominate magazines' pages, even though they are rarely written on deadline. Ron Bishop charts how *Time's* coverage of social protests, such as Occupy Wall Street, constructs an image of a "professional protester" who knows how to get access to the news spotlight but whose activism continues to be marginalized. Catherine Luther and Jody Rightler-McDaniels expose the chillingly subtle racism in four decades of coverage of interracial marriages. Karen Grandy's report on business magazines' coverage of female executives in the U.S. and Canada offers yet another example of media's power to marginalize, even while appearing to favor diversity and equal opportunity. And Lyn Lepre's article on magazines' coverage of the HPV vaccine is a great illustration of how easily (mis)framed any complex issue is.

I have taken a few journalism classes now, but I still can't see whether there is a better way to do journalism. Nonetheless, it is utterly fascinating to continue searching for answers. As scholars, I think our jobs are much the same as when we were journalists, only the beat has changed. We do not write for magazines now; we cover them. And what could be more fun than that?