When investigative reporters approach, many people now “lawyer up” quickly. “As a result,” Stern says, “instead of interviewing people, many investigative reporters spend hours upon hours preparing questions, which are faxed to attorneys . . . [who] then send back carefully worded responses.” That’s not much fun, and it’s another significant restraint on the media watchdog.

At many newspapers, it is, or once was, a hallowed tradition for spirited young reporters to gather after hours at a nearby bar to talk about their stories, gripe about their editors, and imagine how much better their paper could be. Updating this custom for the Age of Focus Groups, Columbia Journalism Review recently persuaded 67 young journalists from 18 papers around the country to get together in small groups to discuss their “Dream Newspaper.”

Meeting over half-priced beers on Chicago’s North Side, or in places such as the Elvis Room at Mama’s Mexican Kitchen in Seattle, the twentysomethings decided that one thing they don’t want is more “news” about J.Lo and Ben. “Newspapers assume our generation wants nothing more than fluff, 24–7 entertainment,” said one participant. “That is flat-out wrong.” Even so, the Chicago bunch, along with many others, want their Dream Newspaper “entertainment-heavy, but not at the expense of news.”

Some of the journalists’ ideas were fairly predictable. They would like more freedom to express their own viewpoints (“When something is just blatantly one-sided or wrong, it would be nice to point it out,” said Anand Vaishnav, a 27-year-old Boston Globe education reporter), to be more “smart assed,” even more foul mouthed (“We’re a foul-mouthed generation,” argued Andisheh Nouraei, a 29-year-old columnist for Creative Loafing).

But one desideratum advanced by the Dream Teams is quite surprising: more international coverage. “As it turns out,” writes Cox, an assistant editor at Columbia Journalism Review, “the young people in our groups—far from being disengaged or self-involved, as the prevailing wisdom goes—see themselves very much as part of a global community.” Along with breaking foreign news and diplomatic coverage, they would like more stories about foreign folk—“people who could be here, but just happen to be there,” as Leslie Koren, a 30-year-old writer for The Record, in northern New Jersey, put it. An example of what she craves: a Boston Globe story about local rock bands emerging in Afghanistan after the defeat of the Taliban.

Religion & Philosophy

Socrates’ Last Words

“If all of Western philosophy is footnotes to Plato, then Socrates’ best lines are the epigraphs: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” “He is wise who knows he knows not.” “All of philosophy is training for death.” What to make, then, of his not-so-quoteworthy final words: “Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; make this offering to him and do not forget”? This apparent “trivial concern with Crito’s unreliable memory,” as Madison, a doctoral student at Loyola University,
Whenever I dream of living in a society with a greater respect for its Sabbatarian past—a fantasy I entertain only with anxiety, since Sabbatarians have a long history of going too far—I think of something two rabbis said. Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague, best known for his tales of the golem, pointed out that the story of Creation was written in such a way that each day, each new creation, is seen as a step toward a completion that occurred on the Sabbath. What was Creation’s climactic culmination? The act of stopping. Why should God have considered it so important to stop? Rabbi Elijah of Vilna put it this way: God stopped to show us that what we create becomes meaningful to us only once we stop creating it and start to think about why we did so. The implication is clear. We could let the world wind us up and set us to marching, like mechanical dolls that go and go until they fall over, because they don’t have a mechanism that allows them to pause. But that would make us less than human. We have to remember to stop because we have to stop to remember.