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### Obsession: Journalistic Pieces Through Four Years

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# Obsession: Journalistic Pieces Through Four Years

An honors thesis presented to the  
Department of Journalism,  
University at Albany, State University Of New York  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with Honors in Journalism  
and  
graduation from The Honors College.

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**Rebecca Melnitsky**  
**Obsession: Journalistic Pieces Through Four Years**  
**Introduction**

Barney and Friends was my first obsession. Then Pokemon. Then Sailor Moon. There were –and continue to be –many others, but they all follow the same pattern. When I like something, I want to know everything about it. I want to know the history, the reasoning behind it, why it even exists in the first place.

This obsessive personality helps me write – it pushes me to check and double check, to learn all I can about a state law or figure skating championships. It makes me focus on the seemingly inane details that make a story.

These are the stories where I have 20 tabs open on my computer. These are the stories where I learn so much more than I'll need.

I have always obsessed over the Olympics. Sochi was especially interesting to watch as countries decided how much they would associate with Russia, the International Olympic Committee, and athletes were caught between sportsmanship and politics.

In 2012, I obsessed over New York congressmen (and congresswomen) who spent money on lobbyists to save their seats from redistricting. I spiced up the numbers-heavy piece with a lede comparing the redistricting process to Project Runway, which used to be another obsession.

When my car was rear-ended, I turned my anger and frustration into my writing. My beloved car – her name was Margrethe Victoria Estelle Mary – and her murderer were my new obsessions. It may not have been healthy to demonize a stranger, but I made it into a funny story.

My 90's Nostalgia piece was born of observing and listening to the people around me and correcting their ideas of when events and trends took place. While insisting on dating movies correctly may annoy my friends, it makes me a better journalist.

My ["Who's the New Pope"](#) blog involved learning about a religion I knew little about. As I explained on the blog's "About" page, "I'm a Journalism student at UAlbany who spends way too much time learning about topics that do not affect me." When it's time to choose the next pope, I am prepared.

Despite all of my research, I overlooked the current Pope – then Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio – in favor of a fellow Argentine with better betting odds.

So as you read my portfolio, keep obsession in mind. Notice how my reoccurring obsessions – pop culture and royalty – come up through these pieces.

And above all, enjoy my four years of work.

## Look Out for These Olympians at Sochi

Originally Published on the Albany Times Union's "This is College!?" blog  
February 6, 2014

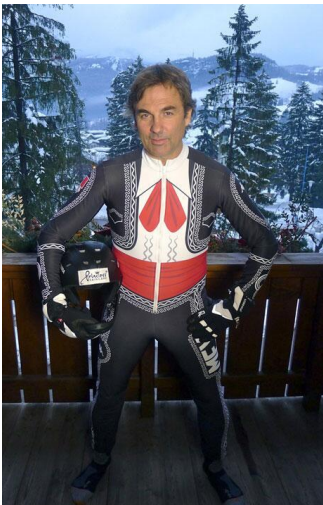
The 2014 winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, have officially started. By the closing ceremonies, many of us will be familiar with the photogenic American gold medalists who also happen to have a corporate sponsorship.

But the Olympics really are more than that. They are a chance for every country to show off their greatest, brightest, and weirdest while against a backdrop of international incidents.

With that in mind, let's talk about some interesting people to look out for and events to keep in mind at this Olympics.

### 1. Prince Hubertus of Hohenlohe-Langenburg

He's a German prince... born in Mexico. He's Mexico's sole winter Olympian, representing his birth country in slalom skiing, which starts on Feb. 22. Prince Hubertus's other hobbies include photography and being a pop star by the name of "Andy Himalaya" or "Royal Disaster." He's drawn **a lot of attention for his mariachi ski costume:**



source: NBC Olympics twitter

His ex-aunt by marriage is the fashion designer **Diane von Fürstenberg**. Thought I should just throw that out there.

At 55, Hubertus is the second-oldest winter Olympian ever. This is Hubertus's sixth games and he's never medaled. He also claims membership in a principality that hasn't existed in almost 100 years. Obviously this guy refuses to give up – and the Olympics are that much brighter for it. Thank you Hubertus.

## **2. The world leaders that will be there... and the ones that won't.**

Usually, the Olympics are a good time to see all sorts of politicians and important people. But for the first time in 14 years, the United States did not send a president, first lady, former president, or vice president to the Olympics. The reasons for this are unclear, but most likely point to **terrorism concerns** or a boycott over Russia's anti-LGBT laws. Two openly gay Olympians – ice hockey player Caitlin Cahow and the figure skater Brian Boitano – were in the delegation instead. Billie Jean King was also asked but **was not able go** because her mother is ill.

Similarly, David Cameron and Angela Merkel were not be at the games. **Nor the French president Francois Hollande, German President Joachim Gauck, or European Union Commissioner Viviane Reding.**

According **to the Guardian**, the International Olympic Committee head Thomas Bach said, “We are grateful to those who respect the fact that sport can only contribute to the development of peace if it's not used as a stage for political dissent, or for trying to score points in internal or external contexts.”

In his speech at the opening ceremony, Bach said that the Olympics should set an

example for the world through peaceful competition and that it “is possible...to live together under one roof in harmony, with tolerance and without any form of discrimination for whatever reason.” **NBC cut this section of his speech from its broadcast.**

So with all of that international drama, who’s still going to the Olympics? The UN secretary-general, Ban Ki-moon; Xi Jinping, the president of China; Japan’s prime minister, Shinzo Abe; and Turkey’s prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan attended the opening ceremony. On the European front, Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta and King Willem-Alexander and Queen Maxima of the Netherlands attended.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte met Vladimir Putin in Sochi even though Russian-Dutch relations have been pretty bad this past year – Russia **arrested 30 Greenpeace activists from a Dutch ship and charged them** with piracy for protesting Arctic oil drilling. A **Russian diplomat was arrested** for alleged child abuse in the Netherlands. People pretending to be electricians **beat a Dutch diplomat** in his Moscow apartment – and drew a heart with the letters “LGBT” on his mirror - in lipstick. **Tomatoes were thrown** at King Willem-Alexander on a visit to Moscow.

Strangely, 2013 was supposed to be a celebration of 400 years of diplomatic ties between Russia and the Netherlands.

### **3. The Jamaican bobsled team.**

If you’ve seen the movie **Cool Runnings** you’re familiar with the story of the underdog team in the 1988 Olympics in Calgary. (If you haven’t seen this movie, drop everything, and go watch it now.)



Anyway, after not going to an Olympics since 2002 in Salt Lake City, the Jamaican bobsled team is back for Sochi. The two-man team of Marvin Dixon and Winston Watt qualified, but they needed \$80,000 to get to the games. The Internet helped out with crowdfunding and dogecoin (a **bitcoin** knockoff with **Doge's face**) and raised **\$129,687.17**. Their first event is on Feb. 16.

Much fundraise. Such inspire. Very Olympics. Maybe Disney will turn it into a movie in five years.

#### 4. Mirai Nagasu



Source: Yahoo Sports/ AFP Photo

By all accounts, Mirai Nagasu is an excellent figure skater. The 20-year-old finished third at the 2014 United States Figure Skating Championships without falling once. She placed fourth at the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver.

Yet Nagasu will not win any medals in Sochi, or even compete only to stumble while attempting a triple axel.

For an unknown reason, Nagasu was passed over for the Olympic team in favor of 22-year-old Ashley Wagner, who finished fourth at the championships.

Such a skip in the lineup was unprecedented. With the exceptions of 1994 and 2010, the top three women's finalists at the U.S. Figure Skating championships go on to compete in the Olympics of that year.

Oddly enough, Wagner placed third in the championships in 2010 – in any other year she would have gone to Vancouver with Nagasu.

Many questions have been raised about why Nagasu was left out in favor of Wagner. The president of the U.S. Figure Skating Association, Patricia St. Peter, defended its decision, saying “The deliberations are confidential, but I can vouch for the fact it was a fair process. The discussion was fair, all the results were analyzed.”

So what advantage does Wagner have over Nagasu?

Wagner has an unprecedented number of sponsorships – **which include** Nike, Cover Girl, P&G, Pandora and BP – for a non-Olympic figure skater. She has a strong history at international competitions – she finished third at this year's International Skating Union Grand Prix Final, while Nagasu did not score high enough to compete.

And, Wagner is white while Nagasu is Japanese-American. **Figure skaters of color rarely have an easy time. Just ask Michelle Kwan or Surya Bonaly.**

On Jan. 30, Nagasu **posted on her Facebook page that** “Not being selected to this year's team was devastating and I remain confused by US Figure Skating's decision to not select me for the 2014 Olympic or World teams. Once I have time to fully process the impact of these decisions, I do know it will renew a fire inside of me. My Olympic journey does not end here.”

As of Feb. 9, Wagner has won one bronze medal as a part of the new team skate event, where the U.S. placed third behind Canada and Russia. She placed fourth in the

ladies short program, which is admirable and gave the U.S. team seven points. **Wagner was not impressed with her score, though.**

One wonders what Nagasu would have done.

## **2 House Jobs on the Line –**

### **Edgy members of Congress pay Albany lobbyists to ensure redistricting doesn't cut out their seats**

Originally published in the Albany Times Union

February 29, 2012

ALBANY — It's time to cut two of New York's congressional districts, and as Heidi Klum says on "Project Runway": "One day you're in, and the next day you're out."

Except in this case, members of Congress have an edge: They can spend tens of thousands of dollars in campaign funds on lobbyists to help ensure that their districts remain viable for re-election.

Following population data from the 2010 census, the state will lose two U.S. House seats from its current 29. The redrawing of those districts is close to completion, according to members of LATFOR, the legislative panel that controls the once-a-decade redistricting process.

State records show six potentially imperiled representatives paid a total of \$169,527 to lobbyists for work on redistricting in 2011: Democrats Joseph Crowley of Queens, Eliot Engel of the Bronx, Brian Higgins of Buffalo, Kathy Hochul of Genesee County and Carolyn McCarthy of Long Island, plus Republican Richard Hanna of Oneida County.

But what are the elected officials getting for their money? It's not something they like to talk about in depth.

Hanna's spokeswoman Renee Gamela said in an email, "Congressman Hanna has retained an adviser for his campaign during the reapportionment process" when asked about the \$22,500 paid to Michael Avella.

The record filed by Avella with the new Joint Commission on Public Ethics, which oversees lobbying, says that "Administrative, Executive and Legislative Branches of Government" were lobbied for "Congressional Redistricting" on Hanna's behalf.

Joseph O'Brien, Engel's press secretary, confirmed the \$40,096 paid to Empire Strategic Planning was "guidance and counsel on redistricting." The firm is run by former state Sen. Nick Spano, who earlier this month pleaded guilty to underpayment of state and federal taxes, a felony plea that has no legal impact on his status as a lobbyist. Engel fired Spano after his tax plea.

Higgins' office declined comment, and Crowley's office failed to respond to questions.

Lobbyists rely on personal connections to influence state officials and ensure lines are drawn in their client's favor, said Bill Mahoney of the New York Public Interest Research Group. "It definitely illustrates how political the redistricting process is," he said.

Barbara Bartoletti, Legislative Director of the League of Women Voters of New York, isn't surprised by the spending. House members "hire lobbyists to get the lines they want," she said, adding that representatives are dependent on the majority conferences in the state Legislature, a body in which their influence can be limited, to redraw the districts.

Bartoletti noted Avella was a former top aide to the state Senate Republican conference (under its previous leader, Joe Bruno), while Patricia Lynch, whose firm Higgins hired for \$55,086, is a former spokeswoman for current Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver. The record states Lynch lobbied for "Monitoring only for potential reappointment legislation."

Crowley spent \$26,038 on lobbyist Brian Meara, who is a close Silver friend. "This is further validation for what we good government groups have been saying all along," Bartoletti said. "The lines are drawn by incumbents."

McCarthy paid \$15,304 to Brown & Weinraub, whose principals include Michael Boxley, a former chief counsel to Silver. (The state records do not list Boxley among the lobbyists working on McCarthy's account.) McCarthy's spokesman Shams Tarek confirmed that the lobbying was for redistricting, calling it "a standard practice."

Kathy Hochul paid \$10,503 to Bolton-St. Johns for "legislative and regulatory representation in New York State." Her spokesman didn't return a call for comment.

These six members of Congress might have special reason to be worried by this round of redistricting: Many believe that the two eliminated districts will come from Western New York and New York City, and will likely ditch one Republican and one Democratic seat.

Higgins' 27th District comprises Chautauqua County and a part of Erie County, including roughly half of Buffalo. Hanna's 24th District cuts a lopsided halfmoon through central New York and contains Cortland, Chenango, Herkimer and Seneca counties. Hochul's 26th District is in western New York and includes Genesee, Livingston, and Wyoming counties.

Crowley, McCarthy and Engel's districts are downstate. Crowley's 7th District has the northern part of Queens and the eastern section of the Bronx, while McCarthy's 4th District covers the western part of Nassau County. Engel's 17th District has parts of the Bronx, Westchester and Rockland counties.

Engel, a House member since 1989, gained his seat in 1993 when he was redistricted from the old 19th District. In the 2002 redistricting, he managed to keep his

power base intact while gaining the southern half of Rockland County from the old 20th District, which was parceled off to four other districts.

In 2001, Engel hired Bolton-St. Johns for \$10,500.

Lobbying isn't the only way to curry favor with the politicians who hold your fate in their hands: Crowley, Engel and Higgins all gave money in the last quarter of 2011 to the state Democratic Assembly Campaign Committee and Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee; Hanna gave \$1,000 to the state Senate Republican Campaign Committee.

"Congressman Hanna has a long history of supporting like-minded candidates and committees throughout New York, including Republicans in the state Legislature," Gamela said.

## **My first car was murdered.**

Memoir piece for Journalism Honors class

A middle-aged woman and her therapy dog murdered my car.

My car's full name was Margrethe Victoria Estelle Mary. She – she was a she – was a 2012 used Ford Fiesta. I named her after four royal women because she was royal to me.

She was bright green, so I could find her anywhere. Margrethe was supposed to be the eccentric-but-also-reliable friend that would carry me through the end of college and my twenties, but I only had her for a month and a half.

It was a Tuesday morning in mid-February. I was driving myself and my fellow intern, Natasha, to the Times Union building. We were on Albany Shaker Road, two seconds away from the parking lot. I had just got past the roundabout where I had to change lanes three times.

A blue and brown car was suddenly too close to me. I slammed the brakes and stopped short. The blue and brown car drove away.

And in the same second, I felt something hit the rear end of the car.

It was a dark red 2014 Ford Expedition. It was three times the size of my lime green 2012 Ford Fiesta – my beloved first car that I had for a month and a half.

We got out of the car.

The woman who hit me was still in her car. She was blonde, 52 years old, and about 5 and a half feet tall. She was clutching her medium-sized dog and crying. I tried to get her attention. I said “Ma’am, you should get out of your car.” She didn’t hear me.

A very kind bystander and either off-duty or ex-policeman came over. He coaxed the woman out and called the police.



He offered to stay until they came. I said yes because that woman was still crying and clutching her dog.

She had been driving her dog – a therapy dog – to an elementary school, she said. The dog was in the front passenger seat, so she worried that the dog was injured and wanted to take him to the vet to see if he got hurt.

I'm not a dog person, but he seemed fine to me. He kept trying to lick my face.

She never said sorry or explained why her giant 2014 Ford Expedition was so close that she hit me.

She wanted her husband. I gave her my cell phone, assuming she would dial the number. She said, "I don't know how use this." So I dialed the number for her.

I kept thinking how she was so weak, and how dare she get to have her husband come to the scene when my parents are 180 miles away. How dare she cry and need someone else. (It's funny – I call myself a feminist.)

She was the same age as my mom, and I kept telling myself that my mom would be stronger, my mom would handle the situation like an adult instead of crying.

I called her after the woman called her husband. I felt like a dumb teenager for getting in a car accident, but all Mom kept saying was, "Take an aspirin and go to the doctor! And make the person in the car with you go too. Everyone at work is saying that you're going to feel sore tomorrow."

"Mom, I'm fine. The airbags didn't even go off," I said. "We weren't hit that hard."

But the next day she would turn out to be right.

The woman's husband came before the police. I gave him my phone number – he knew how to use a cell phone. He gave me his business card – it said he's a salesman at Latham Ford.

The police arrived, took our information – I couldn't find my registration but they got my information anyway – and asked where we wanted our cars towed. The husband immediately answered, "Latham Ford." I told the police I didn't know, so they decide on Capitaland Auto.

Natasha left. The cold started to get the rest of us, so we waited in the husband's car while the tow trucks take our cars away. They're stuck together – "Does that mean they have to tow them to the same place?" I said. The woman laughed at my joke.

It was actually a question.

The tow trucks put chains around our cars and wrenched them apart. My Margrethe's rear window shattered and fell to the ground. I didn't see the real damage, so I still thought everything was repairable.

I called my insurance company. They told me that getting rear-ended is legally not my fault and everything must go through the woman's insurance. I called her insurance, and my struggle with them – which starts with me paying for a rental car because their system "takes a few days to process a claim" – began.

The woman and her husband drove me back to campus. They told me about their son's recent wedding, and I warn them I might write a blog post about this – [which I did.](#)

I spent the rest of the day watching the Olympics, answering phone calls, and trying not to think about what happened.

In the days and weeks after I repeated my public mantra – "I'm just glad no one got hurt" – and my private mantra – "It wasn't my fault. I did nothing wrong."

Later, the insurance company decided that my car was a total loss – it would be more expensive to repair it than to replace it. I needed to see it for myself – and I needed the brush, shovel, flashlight and blanket I had in the trunk.

As I approached Capitaland, I saw a car that looked just like mine – oh, wait – it was my car. That’s when I saw the real damage.



I cried. I cried because seeing the back corner bent in unnatural ways told me that I was never getting my car back. I cried because my beloved car was left in the snow and she deserved better. I cried because I still had a half tank of gas in the car.

And then I stopped crying. I got my things, and drowned my sorrows in sushi, mac-n-cheese, and mixed drinks. Not all at the same time though.

I eventually got a new car. She’s okay, but it took me longer to bond with her. I named her after three royal women who survived personal hardship and lived to at least 90. My new car is dull silver, and every time I struggle to find it in a parking lot, I curse the woman who rear-ended me.

The woman and her husband never called to ask if I was okay.

I never called either.

## 90's Nostalgia

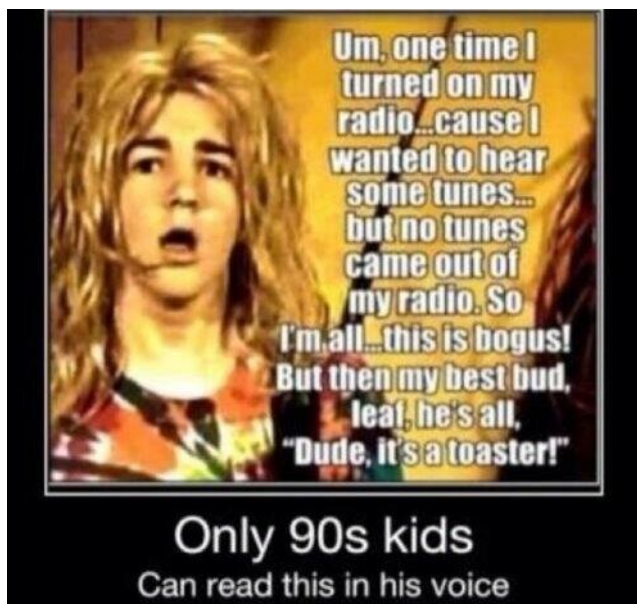
Originally Published on the Albany Times Union's "This is College!?" blog  
April 3, 2014

Today is **Throwback Thursday**, and I'd like to talk about the great plague of my generation. Not selfies, not #YOLO, not the depressing job market, nor millennial trend pieces.

It's 90's Nostalgia.

For those of you unfamiliar with it, 90's Nostalgia comes in many forms.

It's when someone on Facebook says, "Music/TV/Cartoons in the 90's were so much better than the stuff kids have today" and complains about how **SpongeBob** – which premiered in 1999 – has gone downhill. Never mind that good music/TV/cartoons still exist, or that a twenty-something isn't Cartoon Network's target demographic. As far as these people are concerned, "good" pop culture stopped existing when the new millennium began.



Source: @Our90sLife

It's when a picture from **The Amanda Show** circulates with the caption "Only **90's kids** will get this."

The Amanda Show started in 1999 and ended in 2002. Reruns were shown years after that. Amanda Bynes was a child/teen star well into 2007. Then she was in Easy A, then she "retired" from acting, and then things happened to her that I will not discuss here. Her Amanda Show co-stars, Drake Bell and Josh Peck, spun off into the Nickelodeon mainstay **Drake & Josh**, which lasted from 2004 to 2007.

My point is, the Amanda Show and its stars were popular well past the so-called 90's. Knowing Totally Kyle or **Amanda Please!** does not mean you belong to some exclusive club, it means you watched Nickelodeon 10 years ago.

(Older generations are guilty of this too – just because I was born in the 90's doesn't mean I don't know Jenny's number. I watch VH1; I know it's 867-5309.)

It's when your friends say "Wow, your tie-dye shirt is so middle school and 90's," and you remind them – again – that you all went to middle school from 2003 to 2006 – not the 90's. Even if they argue that culturally, the 90's ended in 2004, middle school is still not the 90's.

To quote Don Draper quoting some guy he knew, **nostalgia means "the pain from an old wound."** 90's Nostalgia isn't the belief that the 90's were culturally better or lasted 15 years, it's the desire to go back to childhood. Misattributing trends and pop culture to the 90's is the result of grouping the 90's with childhood. And most BuzzFeed posts.

Fellow millennials, I understand that growing up is scary. We can battle

**Pokemon**, but we cannot battle the unrelenting passage of time. **The Powerpuff Girls** can fight giant monsters, but they cannot fight that feeling when you realize that 2004 was 10 years ago and you become keenly aware of your mortality.

There is a solution though. First, remember we live in the age of the internet. With YouTube and Netflix, a **Hey! Arnold** marathon is only a few clicks away. Second, realize that the rose-colored glasses of nostalgia tint your memory of the 90's. What seemed amazing when you were seven can be awful when you're 21.



Finally, embrace the present. Some day you'll look up and realize that 2014 was a decade ago and teenagers are whining about how cartoons were only great in the 2010's. Live in the now, and enjoy today because you're never getting it back.

After all, #YOLO.

## **Who's the New Pope?**

March 13, 2013

Project for Michael Huber's Spring 2013 Digital Publication

URL: <http://whosthenewpope.wordpress.com>

"Who's the New Pope?" was created for Michael Huber's Digital Publication class. It is a WordPress-based website meant to guide the reader through the selection of a new pope following Benedict XVI's resignation, including profiles on likely candidates for the papacy. This website also covered the circumstances surrounding the resignation and Benedict XVI's future as Pope Emeritus. I used HTML coding, Google Maps, Thinglink, easel.ly, and general WordPress skills to create this website.

Although the assignment was completed before the pope was chosen, I updated the home page to note that fact as soon as Pope Francis was elected.

The attached CD contains a link to the website, in addition to digital versions of the pieces "Look Out for These Olympians at Sochi," "90's Nostalgia," "My first car was murdered," and "2 House Jobs on the Line."