

WEB JOURNALIST COVERS ALL THE NEWS THAT MADE IT TO PRINT

ALL-NIGHTER

STORY AND PHOTO BY CAROLINE TIGER

It's three in the afternoon, and Eric Umansky, C'00, is washing down muesli and yogurt with a large latte at Tazza, a café down the street from his Brooklyn Heights walk-up. It looks like breakfast, but it's not. Four years ago, when he started writing the Today's Papers column for Web magazine *Slate*, it would take him from 10:30 at night 'til five in the morning to read the entirety of the following day's *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times* and *USA Today* and file his analysis in time for readers to digest it with morning coffee. Since then, he's crested the learning curve. Now he clocks out at the more reasonable hour of 4 a.m. and wakes up at 11 instead of noon. Breakfast was about four hours ago.

Umansky spends his daylight hours blogging and writing the occasional op-ed and reported piece for the *LA Times*, *The Washington Post* and *American Prospect*, among others. This surfeit of writing makes it all the more surprising that he once suffered from a debilitating case of writer's block. "My last two



He is as modest about the scope of these incompletes as he is about his accomplishments — he didn't actually receive his B.A. in comp lit until 2000, six years after he was supposed to graduate.

Umansky is well aware of the irony that he makes his living as a writer yet was once helpless at the sight of a keyboard. To be fair, one of the papers he sat on was a 50-page beast for an applied urban studies class. And it's not like he wasn't busy with other things. He studied in Mexico for a semester. He took another semester off and worked for Ed Herman, a professor emeritus at Wharton who edited *Lies of Our Times*, a magazine that focused on the distortions and censorship in major media. After leaving campus, Umansky went to work at *Mother Jones*, where he started as an intern and was hired

as Web editor. This was 1995 — the early days of the Web. He and his colleagues created campaign-finance databases before the Federal Trade Commission had even digitized its records. And his regular photoblog, Must Read, was for many at that time a never-before-seen format.

It was exciting, but after four years in an office, Umansky wanted to travel. He made plans to volunteer with a human rights group in Colombia, but his mother worried about the danger. Instead he volunteered in East Timor, which was nearly as dangerous but not on his mom's radar.

He set a deadline to hand in his incomplete papers before leaving for Indonesia. A true procrastinator, he then worked on other (more fun) projects, including an essay for *Salon* exposing incompletes as

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years at Penn,” he says between bites of granola, “I don't think I turned one paper in on time. I had a paralyzing fear of writing.” He adds: “I had a couple of incompletes to deal with before I could graduate.”



the scourge of academia. Finally, to his graduation officer's amazement, he handed in the overdue papers.

Now a bona fide college grad, the writer filed dispatches from Indonesia with *Mother Jones*, *The Christian Science Monitor* and the *Jewish Daily Forward*. When rioting overcame the referendum in East Timor and journalists and aid workers were evacuated, he caught the last commercial flight out.

Back at home, he started subbing on weekends for a former *Mother Jones* colleague who was writing Today's Papers for *Slate* and eventually took over. A self-described news junkie, he was a natural fit. His editors encourage him to be funny, but he's ultimately considering the substance of the news. "And there are very tight deadlines," he says. "So I can't putz around."

Writing the column is more challenging than simply creating an abridged version of breaking news. Umansky faces the same obstacles newspapers do — if an event happens in the middle of the day, most people know about it by the next morning. What can he add that the typical reader doesn't already know? "It's a game of triage," he says. "In a very short amount of time, I need to read a lot and write a lot, and if I can't add anything new, I may as well skip it." Among the elements he adds is a meta-commentary on the coverage. When President Bush announced earlier this year that by the end of 2006, Iraqi forces would control most of Iraq, *The Washington Post*

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played it big, framing the speech as a plan for disengagement. Umansky contrasted the *Post's* piece with *The New York Times'* deeper analysis that the so-called goal was immaterial, since the insurgency was focused in a small area.

It's obvious from the occasional angry e-mail that editors and reporters are returning the favor by reading him daily. Bill Keller, executive editor of *The New York Times*, once advised him to get out of his pajamas and do some real reporting so he'd see that it wasn't so easy.

For the record, Umansky does change out of his pajamas, either to go to the gym, to a coffee shop or to a place his mother would rather him not go — like Cuba. He traveled there in the summer of 2004 on a tourist's visa because he didn't want Castro's cronies to know he was a journalist. That would've been inconvenient, since his mission was to interview dissidents and independent reporters who had either already been released from jail or who hadn't yet been arrested. (An Argentinean journalist who had tried the same thing a year earlier had been held for two days and expelled from the country.) Umansky's daily dispatches appeared in *Slate*, and he profiled an independent Cuban journalist for *The New York Times*.

As for the writer's block and procrastination, they're still around. But acknowledgment is the first step, and coping strategies go a long way. When he brings his laptop to a coffee shop, he takes the wireless card out so he can't go online, and he makes use of a program that blocks distracting applications. And nothing's more motivating than a graveyard shift. "The impulse to sleep," he says, "ends up outweighing the impulse to procrastinate." Ultimately what keeps him in line is the thought of losing his rent money and sully his professional reputation. These are far more motivating than, say, graduating from college. ■

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