

McGill

SYMPOSIUM ON JOURNALISTIC COURAGE



Wednesday, October 15, 2008

Grady College
THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

The McGill Lecture and Symposium is funded by the McGill Lecture Endowment. Contributors include the James M. Cox, Jr. Institute for Newspaper Management Studies.

McGill

SYMPOSIUM ON JOURNALISTIC COURAGE

Excerpts from four group discussions:

- The private lives of public officials:
What's news?
- Covering communities under siege
- Crimes not forgotten: Bringing
unpunished killers to justice
- Courage captured: The photojournalism
of Carolyn Cole

Note: This report was edited by Kathleen Frey.
The report is online at
www.grady.uga.edu/mcgill, then click on the
Symposium button.

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Welcome



John F. Greenman, Carolyn McKenzie
and Don E. Carter Professor of Journalism,
University of Georgia

John Greenman: On behalf of my colleagues in the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, welcome to the McGill Symposium.

The McGill Symposium, now in its second year, is an outgrowth of the McGill Lecture. For 30 years, the McGill Lecture has brought significant figures in journalism to the University of Georgia to help us honor Ralph McGill's courage as an editor.

Roundtable discussions in 2006 with industry professionals and faculty led us to develop the McGill Symposium as the next step in honoring McGill and exploring journalistic courage.

The McGill Symposium brings together students, faculty and leading journalists to consider what journalistic courage means and how it is exemplified by reporters and editors.

Today, 12 McGill Fellows – undergraduate and graduate students selected by a faculty committee for their strengths in academic achievement, practical experience and leadership – join six McGill Visiting Journalists for a six-hour discussion.

Topics will include:

“The private lives of public officials. What’s news?”

“Covering communities under siege”

“Crimes not forgotten: Bringing unpunished killers to justice”

“Courage captured: The photojournalism of Carolyn Cole”

Today will be a success if the journalists, faculty and students engage one another rigorously. We hope, by day’s end, to answer a question posed by Melissa Ludtke in a recent Nieman Reports. Melissa asked: What does courage look like in the practice of journalism?



The McGill Symposium assembled

The private lives of public officials: What's news?

McGill Visiting Journalists

John Drescher, executive editor, *The News and Observer*, Raleigh, NC

Vicki S. Gowler, vice president and editor, *The Idaho Statesman*, Boise, ID

Moderator

Conrad Fink, William S. Morris Distinguished Professor of Newspaper Management, University of Georgia

Conrad Fink: Before you today are two very, very distinguished journalists: Vicki Gowler, vice president and editor of the *The Idaho Statesman* in Boise, Idaho, a woman who has a fantastic track record and is widely known among journalists today. John Drescher is executive editor of *The News and Observer* in Raleigh, North Carolina, and a well-known journalist throughout the country. What we want to do is have a conversation. This will cover Idaho Statesman's coverage of allegations that Senator Larry Craig engaged in homosexual sex in public bathrooms. John will talk about his newspaper's coverage of allegations that John Edwards engaged in extramarital sex during his campaign for the presidential nomination. Vicki, would you go ahead and tell us briefly about Craig's story?

Vicki Gowler: In October 2006, Mike Rogers, a gay activist blogger who had earned a reputation for outing public officials who were secretly gay, called us the day before he planned to make an announcement on national radio. He planned to out Senator Craig based on anonymous sources that he would not share with us. Mike Rogers isn't a journalist. He didn't ask follow up questions. He didn't ask the typical kind of things a journalist would to verify and make sure that the account was somewhat credible. Three different Idaho newspapers ran the story based on Rogers' blog. I put my best reporter, Dan Popkey, a long-time political columnist, on the story. Popkey had heard rumors about the senator, but we'd never as a paper investigated the truth of the rumors. He wrote a story based on information on the Internet and the public reaction to it. Any paper would have been reasonably satisfied with it. We are the largest newspaper in Idaho and

when we run a story it carries a lot of weight. I thought it was important to investigate this story. I assigned Popkey to it and he walked away from the election coverage and delved into this story. We spent months on this story. We kept hitting weird dead ends. A source would say, 'Oh, yeah, he's gay. He was with my brother. I have evidence on his laptop. I'll give it to you.' And then the source would disappear and we couldn't find her. Senator Craig was in a position to give us what I thought was very clear evidence that would make his denial more credible, but he never did that. So we kept at it. We kept at it for a very long time. The thing you have to know is that Dan Popkey is very rigorous. He left no stone unturned. He talked to everyone from Craig's godparents to his neighbors, to his debate teacher in high school. When Senator Craig was arrested in a Minneapolis restroom and the account of what happened was similar to the ones we found in some other sources. It was an easy decision at that point for me to say: we need to run the story.

Fink: Thank you very much. John?

John Drescher: In October 2007, the *National Enquirer* reported – based on an anonymous source – that John Edwards, who was running for Democratic presidential candidate at the time, had an affair with a campaign worker. It was a very sketchy story. Senator Edwards called me and we had an off-the-record conversation where he urged me not to run the story. He said the allegations in the *Enquirer* story were not true. Our newspaper had already decided, after a lot of debate, not to run the story. We thought there were just not enough facts. The story went away for

a little while until July 2008 when the *Enquirer* published another story that stated the Senator had had a late-night meeting in a Beverly Hills hotel with a woman, Rielle Hunter. The *Enquirer* reporters had confronted Edwards at the hotel. The Senator had gone into a restroom, closed the door, and called hotel security to escort him out of the hotel. Fox News reported, based on an anonymous source, that a hotel worker confirmed the confrontation in the hotel. We were unable to confirm that. One week later, a *Charlotte Observer* reporter cornered Edwards after a speech in Washington and his behavior was very erratic. He actively dodged the reporter. At that point, that's when we first published a story in our newspaper about the *Enquirer* report. We ran stories on a Thursday and Friday. On that Friday, Edwards put out a statement saying he was going to talk on national television that night, and that's when he revealed that he had indeed had an affair.

Fink: I'm fascinated that your summaries begin with the standard newsroom checklist: double sourcing, chasing the paper trail, and talking to the person who is the subject of the story. Did you not, prior to that, sit down and ask: What is the morality of publishing this story? Does the public have a need to know everything? Is there any zone of privacy around public officials? How, indeed, does homosexuality and the occasional affair affect an official's ability to lead or to effectively function in the political environment? Was there an ethical consideration before you went down the standard checklist?

Gowler: Definitely. You know, I worked in the Knight-Ridder Washington, D.C. bureau between 1988 and 1993. Knight-Ridder decided to do a massive poll that asked questions about what drove people to make their choices for president. The character question about if a public official was faithful, and if he or she acted in their private life at variance with their public policy, was overwhelmingly powerful. People cared about that. They wanted to know that information. If so many people felt it was important to know if a person had been honest with their spouse, then I had to care, too. I'm putting out a newspaper for the readers. What they care about is what I care about. I was predisposed to say that character was an important issue. When you have an elective official in an extremely conservative state like Idaho with a large Mormon population, then it matters whether or not an elected official is homosexual.

Fink: John, does the affair that Senator John Edwards had affect his ability to lead and govern?

Drescher: I think it absolutely does. Like Vicki, I was once deeply ambivalent about the public right and the need to know. But through the 1990s, as the Clinton affair unfolded, I saw that the American public does have an opinion about this. So I never doubted for a second that if Edwards indeed had the affair that it was news. Our readers cared about the affair. John Edwards has a compelling biography. It's part of the reason he was elevated to be, in essence, one of the three finalists for democratic nomination for president. Edwards was also considered to be a very disciplined individual. For me, when you run for president, almost everything is fair game. In my mind, if Edwards had had this affair, then it was news.

Fink: And now we'll take questions.

Carolyn Crist: Are you afraid that, if the economy continues to go this way, you won't be able to devote as much time and financial support to these kinds of stories?

Gowler: I am worried that we won't feel that we can commit as many resources to certain stories. I think good editors realize that the most important job of journalism is to be the public watchdog. Every day editors decide which stories will have impact. We do lots of great stories every day. But for the stories that have major impact, an editor has to be willing to say: 'I'm not going to do these two or three stories for the next few weeks. Instead, I'll put a reporter on this story.'

Fink: When we throw our resources into a story such as the two we're talking about there, do we thus shove aside the serious coverage of more compellingly important angles? Do we cover the policy decisions that Craig makes, the governance he has been involved with? Do reporters write about Edwards' potential as a national leader? Are these issues shoved aside by our focus on the affair and homosexuality?

Drescher: I don't think so. This is not the case at my newspaper. We invested an enormous amount of resources to cover John Edwards' campaigns – both in 2004 and 2008. We covered him from biographical and public policy standpoints. The primary reporter we brought in to investigate the allegations against Edwards, he had not worked previously on the Senator's coverage. In this case, it wasn't a choice between pursuing the *National Enquirer* allegations and also writing about what John Edwards believed on energy policy, the environment, or taxation. We were able to do both. The last couple of years have been extremely difficult. We've both seen our staffs cut by at least one-third. So there is more pressure to figure out how to maintain the kind of digging that is important to newspapers. That's part of what I'm fighting right now.

Fink: Your mention of the *National Enquirer* leads me to ask both of you: What are the competitive influences you felt going into these stories? Did you feel compelled by the *Enquirer* or the blogger to get into the story?

Gowler: Well, nobody likes to be beat on a story. And so when the *National Enquirer* or blogger writes a story, it does get your adrenaline going. The trick is to never rush to print with something until you know it's true. Make sure you can stand up for what you've put in the paper. Unless you rush to print, I believe competition is the best thing that could happen. We put out better papers because of it.

Fink: John, do stories get pushed into the mainstream press by supermarket tabloids like the *National Enquirer*?

Drescher: Yes. The *National Enquirer* is a strange animal. It occupies a unique place in American journalism. The *Enquirer* will base its stories on anonymous sources, which we almost never do. The *Enquirer* also pays sources for information, which we never do. Anyone who's being paid to provide information has a clear incentive to lie or exaggerate. An editor must pay attention to a story about a political figure in the area. On the other hand, a newspaper cannot take an *Enquirer* story and feel confident about printing it.

Brian Creech: John, you ran pieces that covered the paper's decisions about what to cover and about your newspaper's relationship with Edwards. How do pieces like that function in the overall picture? Is there a necessity to write those pieces?

Drescher: I write a weekly column that runs every Sunday. It focuses on explaining our coverage, as well as open government and free speech issues. A lot of our readers on the right thought we had been supportive of Edwards. We had done many stories that were biographical, which could have been viewed as positive, because, in my view, the Senator has a compelling personal biography. But we also published stories about his \$6- or \$7-million dollar mansions and his \$400 haircuts. So we've written a lot of stories that were not favorable towards Edwards. Edwards always thought that we should be supportive of

him. When we weren't, I think he was disappointed. So I wrote about the off-the-record conversation that Edwards and I had. When you have an off-the-record conversation, the journalist essentially says, 'Yes, I'll agree as a reporter to go off the record with you if you tell me the truth.' Clearly Edwards did not tell me the truth. He had also publicly acknowledged that he did not tell me the truth. I felt obligated to write a column about that because if our conversation became public knowledge, then critics would say, 'You explained your coverage, but you never told us that you had that conversation.' So I felt obligated to report that I had had a conversation with Edwards.

Alex Dimitropoulos: How much do you report on yourselves as you are reporting a story?

Drescher: Our readers didn't know how aggressively we had reported the Edwards story. They didn't know that a journalist had traveled to New York and to California to confirm the hotel confrontation. I felt it was important to show the readers that while some people thought we had ignored the story, we hadn't. In a difficult financial time, we had spent a lot of money and staff time trying to confirm the story. Getting an affair in print when both parties deny it is a very difficult thing to do. I thought I needed to explain to our readers what the reporting process had been.

Gowler: When we became part of the story – when Senator Craig blamed us – the immediate reaction of my staff

in Boise had been to shut down and not respond to the media's questions. I told them: 'You have to tell our story. We have to share what we did and let the people judge.' I think the openness that the reporters had in talking about the coverage helped build our credibility over time because then people understood us better.



McGill Visiting Journalist John Drescher

"I believe competition is the best thing that could happen. We put out better papers because of it.

—John Drescher



*McGill Visiting Journalist Vicky Gowler
and Moderator Conrad Fink*

Fink: John, your reference to the Internet debate that was kicked off raises the question about the parallel universe out there. The Internet circulates lies, disinformation, and fabrications. Has that taken out of our hands much of the control of news judgment that we once had? In your youth and my youth, we were the gatekeepers, we made the decision.

Drescher: It's definitely different now. Our paper will more likely print a story that in the past we would not have printed. When a certain buzz begins to accompany a story online, our readers expect us to weigh in on the topic. Prior to the Internet, we may have ignored a certain story that was unfounded. Now it's more likely that we will publish a story that sets the record straight in an ongoing public conversation.

Fink: Vicki, can you ignore the Internet?

Gowler: No, you can't. I think sometimes editors look at the Internet as something that is forcing us to publish things we don't want to publish. But I think it's actually opened the avenue for richer, better reporting with more nuanced stories. People can be quite critical when they write in about stories. But there are real gems, too. Sometimes a person who has been in the community for 20 years will comment on a story. A journalist can be accurate, but not right. I think the Internet helps us tell richer stories that are actually closer to the truth. The Internet is not something to be skittish about. A reporter can be smart by interacting with it and getting information.

Crist: When reporters run into dead ends, or receive anonymous tips, but will not go on the record – how do you get past all of the smoke?

Gowler: Well, it depends on the story. You cast a wide net. When you do an investigative story, you brainstorm up front. But the story really depends on shoe leather – really digging in and writing about it. The reporter on Senator Craig's story researched University of Idaho records, expense reports in the congressman's office, and contribution lists. There are all sorts of records out there that you can dig in to find people. Readers visited our Web site and would give Dan Popkey information as well.

Drescher: Also, the pursuit of the paper trail is very important. In today's reporting, it's more often an electronic trail. Email has been a blessing for us. Many of the biggest stories we publish are based on emails. We also have access to phone records and text messages. One of the fights our newspaper is most actively involved with is preserving the electronic trail. My newspaper and nine other news organizations in North Carolina sued the governor of North Carolina for destroying email which, in our view, is public record.

Kristen Coulter: In these stories, do you worry about sources with grudges or political motivations? How do you guard against that?

Gowler: More reporting. We think about what could be the motive of a person all the time. What you do is talk to other people around the source and figure out why he or she got involved with the story. Why give out information about a person? This is a huge concern because a journalist can be led astray very quickly.

Fink: John, you encountered spin from Senator Edwards himself. Did any other sources try to manipulate you?

Drescher: Not directly. The question of motive is a significant one. For example, a reporter can write about a possible relevant motive in the story if the information comes from a quoted source. But in the end, motive. If that person is quoted in the story then the motive needs to be apparent to the reader. At the same time, that source may be supplying you with a key piece of information for the story.

“I think the Internet helps us tell richer stories that are actually closer to the truth.”

—Vicky Gowler

Julie Leung: If this affair or homosexual encounter had happened farther in the past, would both still be worth writing about? At which point is news old and not worth it?

Drescher: Good question. The *National Enquirer* reported that Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska had an affair 12 or so years ago. I don't know any mainstream news organization in the country that has run with that story. Most editors and journalists would think that it happened too long ago and is not relevant in any way.

Fink: Vicki, when is old news not news?

Gowler: I think you do need to have a statute of limitations. If all that had ever happened was that Senator Craig had had gay sexual encounters in college, then we wouldn't have run the story. But the arrest was current. The pattern and the history became interesting.

Marona Graham-Bailey: As editors, what kinds of personal checks and balances do you use to make sure you're walking a fine line? You're largely responsible for setting the culture of your publications.

Drescher: That's a really good question. I think the answer is the editor needs to talk a lot. I talk with my staff and with folks outside of the paper. I talk with other journalists at other newspapers. There are almost never identical matching cases, but there are often similarities. Talk and listen a lot. Then just muddle through and hope you do the best you can.

Fink: Vicki, on the question of sensationalism: What consideration did you give to the families involved in Senator Craig's story? One of the leading journalistic principles I discuss in my ethics course is to serve the public. We also discuss the societal value of humanness. These stories inflicted incredible pain on the families involved. Talk to me about that.

Gowler: In the case of Senator Craig, all of the children were grown, so we didn't have to worry about the impact of school children on a playground, which has happened in other stories. The impact on the senator's wife was huge. I truly believe she didn't know. You know, there's an old adage — I'm sure you've learned it in your classes — that any time you write a story, put your mother's name in it. She is someone you love, trust and revere. Ask yourself: Would this story be fair? It's a simple exercise. I don't think we do it often enough. It's great to be passionate about a story. But when you're a journalist, you must take care about where your passion lies. Passion can lead a journalist astray.

Fink: So, John, we do serve the greater need of the public, even though stories may inflict enormous emotional damage on an individual. Mrs. Edwards took a double hit. The first occurred when the senator told her, and the second hit came when you put the story on your front page.

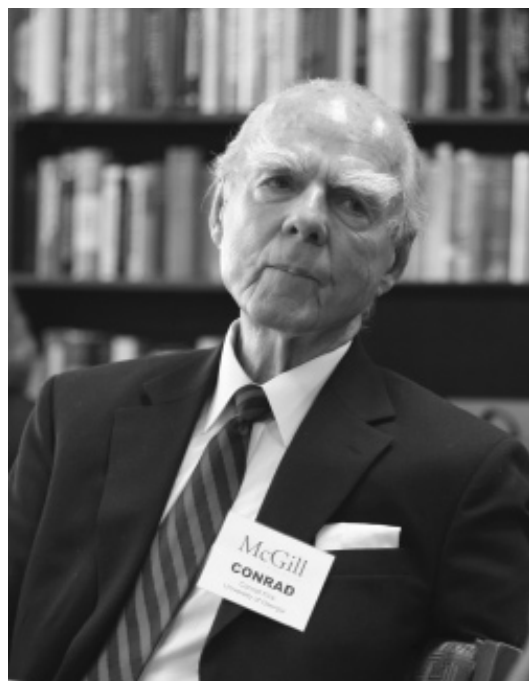
Drescher: That's true. Although Elizabeth Edwards has taken a lot of criticism because according to her husband, she knew about the affair some time ago. She encouraged him to continue with his presidential campaign. This was a dangerous thing to do. So Mrs. Edwards has been criticized for being part of the cover-up, in essence. I think Vicki's word 'conflicted' is a really good one. I like conflicted journalists, you know. These are reporters who are conflicted on almost all the stories they write because they understand both sides of the issue. Sometimes there are more than two sides.



McGill Fellow —

Fink: Is our probing coverage driving otherwise talented people out of public life? I'm reminded that, had we revealed President John F. Kennedy's phenomenal womanizing, perhaps his ability to lead would have been blunted. There was a code of protecting Franklin Delano Roosevelt. No pictures were taken of his crippled legs. When did this change come about — in terms of the probing coverage of individuals? And secondly, are we driving people out of public life?

Gowler: I hope we're not driving talented people out. Based on the 50 editorial endorsement interviews I've done over the last three weeks there are plenty of talented people still seeking public office. I don't think the American public expects people to be perfect. People voted for President Bill Clinton after his scandal came out.



Moderator Conrad Fink

Amanda Woodruff: In this election season, there's been a lot of focus on *The New York Times* being a biased paper because its editors backed Barack Obama. What do you think about political endorsements for newspapers?

Gowler: I'm conflicted. (Laughter) When I became top editor for the first time in Duluth, Minnesota, I did not ask the staff to do endorsements the traditional way. Instead I insisted that we interview all of the candidates and write what we liked and what concerned us about each candidate. The experiment was far more work than just focusing on the person you endorse. With the country split so evenly between Republicans and Democrats, I think our endorsements become confusing for readers. I feel comfortable writing endorsements in our local races. We can bring in the candidates, talk to them, watch what they're doing. I think endorsements are good guidance, but they must be done carefully and well. The editors must explain to the public again and again why the newspaper writes endorsements and exactly how the reader should use them.

Fink: May I ask the final question? You both have delivered very impressive discussions of how sensitive you were in considering all aspects of the story. Why is it, do you think, that so much evidence exists that the public distrusts not only what we do, but the motives behind what we do?

Gowler: It's frustrating. We try to be transparent. We're easily reached by email. When people know us, I think the trust builds. But most people in a community do not know us individually. It's easy to just blame the media. I don't know how that will change. I am really concerned. I watched the presidential debate coverage – how Fox News covered it and how CNN covered it. Depending on what a person watches on television today, your world view is different. I think it's a difficult time for the media to be trusted, but it's absolutely essential that we keep working at it.

Drescher: An economist at Duke University named James Hamilton has written a book called *All the News That's Fit to Sell*. I like the way economists look at things. Jay is a really smart guy. He says it's natural that the public doesn't trust the media. When a news source like Fox News puts forth news in a different way, then it's logical that consumers – or at least some consumers – would then look at the mainstream media with more skepticism. From Hamilton's viewpoint, the public's distrust is a rational economic thing. I think we have to be as honest as we can, be as fair as we can, be as accurate as we can.

Covering communities under siege

McGill Visiting Journalists

Sarwat Husain, editor in chief, *Al-Ithihaad*,
San Antonio, TX

Judith Martinez-Sadri, editor, *Atlanta Latino*
and AtlantaLatino.com, Atlanta, GA

Moderator

Patricia Thomas, professor and Knight Chair in
Health and Medical Journalism, University of Georgia

Excerpts, edited for brevity and clarity, from a group discussion

Patricia Thomas: We chose to call this session “Covering communities under siege” because both of these editors and entrepreneurs represent communities that have been used as political footballs – a code word for bigotry and racism – for the past seven years. These ladies have a lot of nerve. They put money at risk; they put themselves at risk. They’re doing a different kind of journalism. Who would like to ask the first question?

Brian Creech: How do your publications work to build connections between the communities you serve and the larger geographic region in which you’re located?

Sarwat Husain: First, understand who I am. Then you will be able to understand my answers. I’m an activist. Serving the community at large means that my readers understand who Muslim-Americans are, what they are doing, what their issues are. It is very important for the community at large to understand that. My paper definitely has a slant. It is serving only the Muslim community. But if you look at our readership, it is non-Muslims and Muslims. We bring together foes, friends and everybody else.

Judith Martinez-Sadri: I’ll give you a bit of background on how we started *Atlanta Latino* in Georgia. In 1999, I went online looking for a Web site featuring information for Hispanics in town. There was none. My husband had an information technology background and I had a journalism background. So we started AtlantaLatino.com. We were the

first Spanish Web site for Latinos in the state. We created a very strong footprint because that gave us the ability to communicate with other journalists, not only in the United States, but around the world. As of three years ago, the immigration laws in Georgia were some of the toughest in the country. So Latinos have struggled here. At *Atlanta Latino*, we’ve focused on covering those stories. We’re trying to give a voice to people who are hard workers and whose rights are being violated almost every day. Things have changed tremendously since we started. In 2002, we launched the newspaper.

“We’re trying to give a voice to people...whose rights are being violated almost every day.”

—Judith Martinez-Sadri

Julie Leung: This past summer I joined a group of Asian-American women starting a magazine that caters to our ethnicity. We’ve had so much trouble finding funding. How do you find the funds? I noticed your newspapers don’t have that many advertisements.

Martinez-Sadri: In 1999, Delta was one of our main sponsors. At that time, budgets allowed for new emerging markets, or diversity dollars. After 9/11 happened, we couldn’t get funding from Delta anymore. We began selling advertising locally and nationally. I’m sad to say it, but in many cases the businesses just wanted to be politically correct and place an ad in a minority publication. You also have to back up your readership with readership studies. Create a media kit with statistics to create a presentation for a potential media buyer. We also put all of our savings into this project. We had to risk.



Visiting Journalist Judith Martinez-Sadri
and Sarwat Husain

Husain: My husband and I started the paper right after 9/11. No one would touch advertisements for a Muslim newspaper. We started with our money because we thought we would serve only San Antonio, or 1,000 copies per month. In three months, the paper went out all over Texas. Today our printout is 60,000 copies per month. We still struggle with funding. In the first month of the newspaper, I went to a big car dealer in San Antonio with so much confidence. This is a big company, right? They spend diversity dollars. The car dealer agreed to pay \$7,000 for the center spread. And I was so glad. The first ad that comes to me is one with a beautiful car parked on the beach with a half-naked woman. In a Muslim publication, that would not work. I asked him if we could change it. He said, 'Do you want the ad or don't you want the ad?' I asked him, 'Are you selling the woman or are you selling the car?' Of course, I made enemies with him. After that, news spread like fire in San Antonio and none of the other car companies would give me an ad unless I took whatever they sent. We do go to the community and they support us, but it's a big struggle.

Carolyn Crist: Do you work with the mainstream media, or do you see most of your strength in niche publications?

Husain: I work with the mainstream media. I write a column for the *San Antonio Express News*. I keep all of the media as my friends. I even invite them to celebrate Christmas with us because I have to keep them with me. The mainstream press still has a lot of questions, such as who we are and what we are. But it is I who need them more than they need me.

Martinez-Sadri: At *Atlanta Latino*, we've always worked with the local and even national mainstream. For the past three years there have been and are many, many issues in the Hispanic community. Sometimes sources don't want to talk to Fox 5 or Channel 2. So we work in collaboration with the mainstream media. We talk to the sources and tell them: 'The more people who know your story, the better.' Many journalists call *Atlanta Latino* and ask for our collaboration.

Thomas: Could you talk about what it's like to be from the ethnic press and to get call backs from public officials, politicians, and people in power?

Martinez-Sadri: For us, it's been very difficult to get call backs. But when we request an interview, we get contacted right away. We interviewed Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin easily after we sent a letter to her office. Some counties do not speak to us – and I could tell you right now that Cobb County is extremely hostile. I have hired some journalists who know some Spanish, but have no Latino accent. They are able to get an answer more easily. We may request records and the officials would say, 'Come and get them.' Or they would say, 'Well you have to pay \$1 per sheet for the records.' I would ask them why they charged me more. Some people who are not used to seeing different ethnicities are reluctant to change and don't want to cooperate. But it's a minor percentage.

Husain: My problems are more than hers because, really, no politician or law enforcement official would like to be seen working closely with us. The FBI chief works closely with me. They want to know what is happening at the mosque, and they think I am a source. They are so friendly. But when I ask them to pose for a picture, they say, 'No, no, no, no.' Politicians must understand that about 3 million Muslims are registered voters in the country and most of them are not committed to one party or the other.

Thomas: I think it's interesting that both of you went to the Democratic National Convention in Denver. Do you feel that you asked different questions on behalf of your readers than the mainstream reporters?

"We created a very strong footprint because that gave us the ability to communicate with other journalists, not only in the United States, but around the world."

—Judith Martinez-Sadri

Martinez-Sadri: Yes. I found that the stories I wrote no one else reported them. I wrote about a group of Mexican students who volunteered at the convention as part of a project at a university in Mexico. They came to learn about the political process here in the U.S. I wrote a story about Mexicans' attitude towards Barack Obama. I also covered relationships between the U.S. and Latin America such as the North American Free Trade Agreement. I also filed to receive press credentials for the Republican National Convention in St. Paul. Nobody even returned a call.

Alex Dimitropoulos: Do you think that religion as an institution should be exempt from something that political cartoonists cover?

Husain: Religion should not be exempt. But lies and misinformation in cartoons should not be communicated. For any religion, the respect from the cartoonist should be there, whether the subject is Christianity or anything else. For the Danish cartoon, it was not the pictures themselves we were against; we were against what the cartoonist said.

Marona Graham-Bailey: What will be the role of ethnic media once mainstream media is more comprehensive?

Martinez-Sadri: For the Hispanic community, the oldest Spanish newspaper is called *La Opinion* and it is 80 years old. While the mainstream media does its best to create relationships with their community, we will always be the first approached by the community. We are there at someone's birthday or someone's funeral. The mainstream press is too structured to cover anything unless it is really,



McGill Fellow ——— and



McGill Visiting Journalist
Judith Martinez-Sadri

really news. The other day I received a phone call to attend a Hispanic heritage event at a middle school. I left the event with 10 lead stories from different angles. For the mainstream, I think it's still a long way for them to go to achieve that — the trust of their minority readers. We might change the way we do business, but it's a viable media.

Crist: Would it be positive or negative for the ethnic media to be absorbed by the mainstream?

Husain: If we can team up and we can do it, it will definitely be positive. But I do not see that coming because the stereotypes do not change. I invite myself on talk shows, television, and other places. They do interview me, but they still may change my words. I have an example. I called the *Express News* to tell them about a column I sent to the paper in honor of women's month. The story covered the fact that Muslim are not treated as human beings and have no rights. The editor slaps back at me saying that what I wrote was not true. I asked him, 'Are you a Muslim woman or am I?' Just imagine—the editor of religion! I couldn't fight with that guy. But I didn't complain. I didn't want to make enemies.

Jason Butt: Do you ever feel the need to compromise to make someone happy who has more power in the decision-making process?

Husain: You see, my goal is not to make him happy. I would not compromise my writings there. What I would compromise with is that I did not complain about him.

JoAnn Anderson: You talked about your involvement in the community. I'm curious to know how you balance maintaining a relationship to the community, but also striving to have a sense of objectivity.

Martinez-Sadri: It's very, very tough – especially when you have close relationships. For example, we have only one Latino state representative named Pedro Marin. He voted in favor of a proposal that would hurt the community. We are close friends, but he voted in favor of that proposal. I had to write about it. He was upset with my story. I made sure we clarified that he is representing a district and he is in the House of Representatives to speak for the people in his district. It's important for journalists to set standards so subjects know who you are. They know they won't be able to buy you with lunch or anything.

Thomas: What kind of prestige does being a journalist have in your community? Sarwat already said they are held in low regard. Judith, what about the Latino communities?

Martinez-Sadri: I come from a family of engineers. [Journalism] is not a popular career – especially because Latin American journalists cannot do journalism. A reporter cannot write freely. But now my newspaper is doing well and my father is proud of me.

Shannon Otto: Has the current economic downturn affected your ability to cover area schools and local stories?

Husain: I will cover stories that affect Muslim school children. But as far as stories within the Muslim community – the internal problems are not that bad. We don't have gang problems. Muslim families are very close-knit and pay close attention to their children. But we don't have the time or manpower to dig and find out what is really going on because there are other stories for us to cover.

Martinez-Sadri: The current economy has made people think twice about supporting the paper. We really have to beg for money. The community does see the importance, though. *Atlanta Latino* is given out free. We print 60,000 copies twice a month and have 500 paid subscriptions. I work with freelancers in the editorial room. In the good days, I used to have seven full-time reporters. Now most are freelancers. We used to print weekly, and when business owners noticed we cut back, they noticed. They called us and said, 'Listen, I don't need an ad and I don't have the money, but I can give \$1,000. Would that help you?' So the community is reacting to the needs of the paper.

Creech: What is the most important thing your papers do to stay independent, vibrant and relevant within your communities?

Husain: We pay attention to the needs of our communities. Muslims see a lot of negativity in the mainstream media and they don't like it. A small community paper gives them hope.

Martinez-Sadri: We listen to our readers. Our policy when readers call the newspaper is that the reporter listens and spends as much time as the reader needs. We ask questions: What worries the reader? What do they want to read more about? Why didn't they like a story? How did a story impact their lives? Mainstream newspapers cannot move as quickly as small minority papers. We act quickly to please the reader and keep them from getting lost. I love to go into the community and talk to people and listen.

“We pay attention to the needs of our communities.”

–Sarwat Husain

Crimes not forgotten: Bringing unpunished killers to justice

McGill Visiting Journalist

Jerry Mitchell, reporter, *The Clarion Ledger*,
Jackson, MS

Moderator

Valerie Boyd, assistant professor and Charlayne
Hunter-Gault Distinguished Writer in Residence,
University of Georgia

Valerie Boyd: We're ready to welcome Jerry Mitchell to the table. Jerry is an investigative reporter for *The Clarion-Ledger* in Jackson, Mississippi. First, tell us how you became the guy with this unusual beat?

Jerry Mitchell: I got into journalism because I like to write. I found out I am actually better at reporting than writing. I didn't set out to be an investigative journalist. I've always been attracted to dig underneath and piecing things together. In 1989, the Mississippi legislature decided to seal the records of the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission for 50 years – until, say, 2027. That organization was essentially a state segregationist spy agency. At that time, a source gave me information on the case of prosecuting Byron De La Beckwith, a white man, for the killing of Medgar Evers, a black man. Almost no evidence on the case existed anymore. Not long after, the Jackson City police discovered a box of crime scene photographs while they were cleaning out a closet. The case was reopened in 1989. I interviewed Mr. Beckwith. He let me visit him in Signal Mountain, Tennessee, which is a beautiful place just before dark, but not if you happen to be standing next to De La Beckwith. He walked me out to my car and said, 'If you write positive things about white Caucasian Christians, God will bless you. If you write negative things about white Caucasian Christians, God will punish you. If God does not punish you directly, several individuals will do it for him.' I was drawn into that case and Beckwith was convicted in 1994. One by one, I began looking at cases that I thought would be most viable for re-prosecution. I didn't set out to

do this for 20 years of my life. My advice to students who pursue these kinds of cases that require courage is to also have persistence. When I was your age, I thought I had to know everything before I wrote one word. Now I realize you don't know. You just have to know a piece and you can write that. Gradually, the puzzle comes together. It really works. There really is such a thing as power of the press. The way you manifest your power is you don't give up.

Boyd: Why does a white guy from Texas apply his persistence to this particular area? In the *American Journalism Review* (April/May 2005) article, the writer says, 'When Mitchell talks about the slain civil rights leader (Medgar Evers), he sounds as if he is speaking of his own next of kin.' Why?

Mitchell: It's always stuck in my craw when people get away with crime – especially murder. I think I was just raised with that sense of justice. These causes represent the height of injustice because not only did the guys get away with murder, but everyone knew they were getting away with murder. I'm very much a history buff. I'm pretty obsessive. I read stacks of books on this stuff. I want to know everything there is to know about something. I had plenty of people tell me, 'Oh, Jerry, why don't you leave these old guys alone?' I tell them the thing to remember is that these are young killers who just happened to get old. There's a reason that no statute of limitation exists on murders. Evidence can come with new witnesses who weren't available back in those days because many people were very afraid to come forward.

Boyd: Have you ever had any fear of retaliation for the work you do?

Mitchell: Yes. Beckwith was not alone in threatening me. A Klansman once told me he knew where me and my family lived. He had pictures of us. That was disconcerting. The FBI investigated that situation for me. I think journalists have hurdles to cross – if you do other writing or the kind of stuff I do. A reporter has to recognize that harm could come, but what you write about is more important. There really is such a thing as the power of the press. I see a number of journalists write a big story, but they don't write about it again. If you're trying to effect change, that approach will not work. You have to be persistent. You have to write about it until you're sick of it. That sounds horrible, but it's true.

Brian Creech: When you sit down with documents, what type of things are you looking for?

Mitchell: You want to have some sense of the story before you begin researching it. You want to have some working knowledge of the case or you won't know the players. Many times a journalist must read a document cold, but I prefer to know what I'm reading and who the players are before I dive into documents.

JoAnn Anderson: How did local law enforcement react to re-opening these cases?

Mitchell: If you think you're going into journalism and you'll make a bunch of people happy, I'm here to dissuade you. You do not go into journalism to make friends. An inherent part of the job is that you'll make some people angry. My advice is to do the right thing and don't worry if people give you grief.



McGill Visiting Journalist
Jerry Mitchell



McGill Fellows ————— and
Jason Butt

Marona Graham-Bailey: When you are interviewing people, do you turn on some interviewing skills, and turn some off, depending on who you're interviewing?

Mitchell: Sure. I'm the opposite of veteran CBS reporter Mike Wallace. I don't start talking to people with guns blazing. I think you get more information from people when you do not do a 'gotcha' interview. If you're silent and listen to your subject, then they will presume they know about you. The key is to let people talk. Don't interrupt them and it's amazing what you get from people sometimes. Years ago Oprah Winfrey interviewed singer Michael Jackson. She asked him, 'Did your father ever beat you?' A writer once [said] that was the wrong approach. The right question should have been, 'Tell me about your father.' It's amazing what you get from open-ended questions, as opposed to closed-ended ones.

Boyd: In addition to asking open-ended questions, how do you get information from people?

"My advice is to do the right thing and don't worry if people give you grief."

—Jerry Mitchell

Mitchell: I tell them where I'm from. I think that's a good idea for developing sources in general, not just if you're talking to Klansmen or whomever. Find ways to connect to people. Taking people out to eat is not a bad idea.

Boyd: You went to a barbeque with Beckwith. I wouldn't be able to sit across the table from Beckwith. How do you do that?

Mitchell: To be honest, when I was with Beckwith, he used the N word and I was so outraged. I laughed through half of the interview because it was outrageous. He thought he was being funny. You do your best to not react. Try not to show any outward reaction if you can. Do not let your subject go unquestioned. Beckwith claimed to have gotten his ideas from the Bible. I asked him, 'Well, where exactly did you read that?'

Valentina Tapia: Aside from masking your reaction, how do you put yourself and your interview subject at ease when you find their beliefs abhorring?

Mitchell: Try to focus on the listening aspect. Listen carefully and ask yourself if you need to ask a follow-up question.

Creech: What are things that an editor does to be supportive for you? I use my boss Debbie Skipper as a sounding board all the time. She understands that I may not have a story by the weekend. But she knows what I'm working on. I'll tell her who I've talked to. She will ask me if I've thought about this or that. It's tremendously valuable.

Alex Dimitropoulos: How did you share *The Clarion-Ledger's* racist history with the community?

Mitchell: *The Clarion-Ledger* was a very racist newspaper in the 1950s and 60s. I told my editors, 'We've got to report on ourselves.' So we did. I wrote a story about how we had printed propaganda and had killed stories at the request of the sovereignty commission. That story ran prominently on the Sunday editorial page. I suggested we also write an apology. Years earlier the paper had somewhat apologized and I thought we should specifically address this. But the editors didn't do that.

Tamara Best: As you're researching these cases, do you reach a dead end?

Mitchell: Absolutely. At one point, I worried I would not stay focused on the Mississippi burning cases. So I downloaded a photo of the FBI reward poster for that case and I made it a screen saver on my computer. It is a reminder to me: don't forget.



Moderator Valerie Boyd and McGill
Visiting Journalist Jerry Mitchell

Boyd: How long did it take you to write the [Edgar Ray] Killen story?

Mitchell: At times, I worked on the story 100 percent of the time. Other days, the story used 25 percent of my time. Many of these cases unfold over time.

Carolyn Crist: When you spend 100 percent of your time working on cases, how to you know when to call it a day?

Mitchell: I've gotten better about stopping my work. My wife would probably dispute that. She likes to tell the story of when we went to the hospital for her labor pains. I brought along the Sovereignty Commission records for light reading.

Shannon Otto: In your research, have you become fixated on a person who you felt was guilty?

Mitchell: Sure. I may be convinced someone is guilty, but there may not be enough proof to prove it. That's the rub. I never write what I feel. I write about the evidence out there and what people are saying. The notion of objectivity came about in the 20th century. But what does it mean to be objective? What is objective to me may not be objective to someone else. I think a much better word is fair. Are you fair to everyone? Did you let everyone have their say?

Creech: What is your method for persuading individuals to leak you documents?

Mitchell: It's a process. My initial source didn't share the actual documents with me. The source began to read the files to me. My subsequent source confirmed the information. And then a third source shared the files with me. Try to develop – and I mean in a professional way – friendships with people. Encourage them to feel good about you and trust you. People want to get information into the public for one reason or another. Sometimes the journalist is just the facilitator. And I'll protect my sources to the grave. That's part of your job as a journalist. You go to the grave with your sources.

Otto: Have you ever felt driven by this notion of white guilt to write these kinds of stories?

Mitchell: I guess I've had some white guilt in the sense of I wish I could go back and redo some things that happened when I was growing up. But I don't think I view it from that perspective. I do think there's a redemptive quality to this kind of writing. I've certainly witnessed some racial reconciliation.

Boyd: How has your work impacted your ideas about race and privilege?

Mitchell: Oh, greatly! I was very ignorant about the civil rights movement. Many times the movement will be remembered only with Martin Luther King, Jr. There are so many other heroes who deserve credit and should be recognized. King said once that one day the South will recognize its true heroes. I think that's finally begun to happen. And it's a good thing.

Courage captured: The photojournalism of Carolyn Cole

McGill Visiting Journalist

Carolyn Cole, staff photographer, *Los Angeles Times*

Moderator

Mark Johnson, lecturer, University of Georgia

Excerpts, edited for brevity and clarity, from a group discussion

Mark Johnson: It is my true pleasure to introduce Carolyn. She is at the top of her field. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 2004 for her images in Liberia. She has won the Best Photojournalism Award, Photographer of the Year, Picture of the Year, and the Robert Capa Award given by the Overseas Press Club. She's going to talk and show some of her images. Then we'll open the discussion for questions.

Carolyn Cole: I want to thank Mark for inviting me here today to talk about courage. I've always been afraid of two things: photographing celebrities and public speaking. So I appreciate the opportunity to confront my one of my fears yet again. In my pictures, content is always first priority. Whether the subject is a convention, a protest, a portrait, a concert, or a conflict, I go into each assignment with the same approach. I ask myself what important aspect readers should know. Often the most important pictures capture what others do not want us to see, like this woman suffering from mental illness in India. As our world grows increasingly divided by race, religion, and wealth, it is critical that photojournalists bridge the gaps in human understanding. What I look for most are moments that capture our most basic feelings: fear, pain, despair, delight, and love. Gaining access is one of the most difficult parts of my job, whether it's a local school or across international borders. I once snuck into Haiti riding under the bus seats because it was too late to get a visa before the Americans invaded – I think that was in 1994. I'm often asked if I'm an adrenaline junky or if I get scared. I do get scared. My fellow photographers and journalists help me work

through that. I never expected to be covering situations like this. But wherever American or U.N. troops are involved, I consider it my responsibility to take pictures. I have a strong sense of purpose. I hope all of you will push yourselves to learn new skills. That doesn't mean running off to a war zone. I was able to progress slowly by working at a small newspaper and making my way up.

Amanda Woodruff: Were you ever terrified being in Baghdad while the bombs exploded?

Cole: You have no idea. In 2004, I was embedded with the Marines during the battle for Najaf. The Marines dislike women as embeds, but because I was with a male colleague, they accepted me. The strategy of the Marines was to fight their way in to Najaf. Several people died there, although I didn't see them in front of me. That's the last time I went to Iraq. It has become very dangerous for Westerners to be on the streets. I always tell people I'm an American journalist because I never want to misrepresent myself. It is important to represent yourself for who you are. I've never had trouble with that coming back to hurt me in the end.

Shannon Otto: Have you ever experienced a conflict between acting as a journalist or a citizen first – wanting to help your subjects?

Cole: Well, I know my role very clearly. Usually there are other people around me, whether it's the aid worker, the medic, the Marine, who are also there. I concentrate on what I'm doing and let the other people work on what they are supposed to do. If I'm not doing my work, then there's no reason for me to be there.

Kori Price: How much time and detail did you devote to taking notes?

Cole: I take a lot of notes, especially as our staff gets smaller. I've been contributing to stories with observations and quotes. I try to report the stories through extensive captions or field notes. We're losing staff all the time so I'll probably be doing more note-taking actually.

Julie Leung: Have you ever been the target of hostility?

Cole: No. Once I saw a helicopter – and I always run toward helicopters because something important is going to happen. So much debris began flying up in the air from this helicopter. I was hit in the head by a giant metal billboard. It knocked me out. My whole body went numb.

Carolyn Crist: How do you blend in and get your subjects to trust you?

Cole: I really don't try to blend in. It's impossible for me. Why should I? I want them to know I'm a journalist and I'm American. I will respect whatever the cultural norms, but not because I'm hiding. As for my subjects, they know my sincerity. They know I'm there to do my job.

Wes Elkin: Was there a language barrier that you encountered where no one speaks English?

Cole: You know, a lot of my job is visual communication. But in terms of translation, I'm sure there have been cases where I wish I could have communicated better. Most often, I know the story. Somebody in every part of the world speaks a little bit of English. Sometimes I'll ask the people to write down notes in their language. Then I'll take it back and get it translated.



McGill Visiting Journalist Carolyn Cole

Marona Graham-Bailey: How do you cope with all of these images of extreme human emotion in your mind?

Cole: I know that the stronger the pictures I make, then the more people are going to respond to that article. So I channel all of my energies into every day that I go out and work. That's where I channel my emotion – into the pictures. If I break down in the field and cannot get through the day, then what good is that? I don't satisfy myself, the editors, or the public that needs to know the information. For many years, I never turned down anything. I was always there saying I'll go if you want me to go. That's the way I made my contribution.

Brian Creech: How do you personally make order out of the chaos?

Cole: The best way is to learn early through smaller experiences how to maintain your calm. You cannot block out everything because you

must worry about what's going on behind you and how the situation is changing. It is a delicate balance between blocking out the background and being aware of your surroundings. I don't have any special skills. I've been practicing this for 20 years and it's not any different than playing the piano.

Creech: Was there a moment in your career when you realized, 'I got it'?

Cole: No. I just keep pushing and pushing until I get to the heart of the story. You do whatever it takes. If they won't let me in the front door, then I'm going in the side door. If I don't get in the side door, I'll go to the back door. For photojournalists, we cannot report back what someone else saw. We have to be there.

"I just keep pushing and pushing until I get to the heart of the story."

—Carolyn Cole

Johnson: Why is it important that these stories be told here in America for a newspaper like the *Los Angeles Times*? Why is it important for you to be telling the story?

Cole: It's not important for me to tell the story, but someone needs to tell it. The problems of the world keep getting bigger and bigger. It's ironic that the decrease in journalism staff happens at the same time we need more journalists. It's critical that people go out and understand this culture versus that culture. The fear of the unknown creates the most problems in the world. People ask me what things are like in Cambodia. I tell them that people are the same everywhere in the world. Everyone desires to have a peaceful, prosperous life. You make contact with these people to know there's no reason to be afraid.

Johnson: I'd like to talk about the Church of the Nativity situation for a moment. You're covering the event with your long lens and suddenly a group of people make a run for the church. At what point do you say, 'I need to join them'?

Cole: I don't follow the fly-on-the-wall philosophy. In this case, some protestors had run up to the church a couple days before with signs. The Israeli army took them away and journalists went with them. Some reporters were arrested and lost their press passes. I do not think journalists approached the church again because they didn't want to lose their press pass. So a group of about 20 people headed toward the church and I joined them. They started running and 10 of them made it into the church. I was the eleventh person to go in. The rest were rounded up by the Israeli army. You cannot be taking pictures of the backs of people's heads. You have to be in front of them. This means you need to be in good physical shape. It's a very physically and mentally demanding job. I was shocked that I made it into the church, though. Some of my editors did not want me to stay there. I called then managing editor Dean Baquet. I said, 'Dean, is it true you want me to leave the church?' He said, 'Well, do you feel safe in there?' I said, 'Yes. I feel perfectly safe in here.' Of course I stayed after that.

Crist: What has been your toughest assignment?

Cole: Afghanistan would definitely be the hardest. We couldn't come in from Pakistan. We entered from the north in Tajikistan and it took five days to cross those incredibly difficult roads. But all stories have had their difficulties. People get injured and killed all the time, but I've just been lucky. It's a risky job and if you're not willing to take those risks, then you don't. There's a place for all kinds of journalism.



McGill Fellows

Johnson: What are five things a recently graduated journalism student needs to know?

Cole: I don't think there's a mystery to this. In any profession, it's about working hard and pursuing your dream. Exercise and stay healthy. And you definitely have to have curiosity of the world and care about people. If you're sincere, then people are going to open up their lives to you. You may think that's stealing something from them, but I don't think so.

Valentina Tapia: How often have you experienced limitations on your career because you're a woman?

Cole: I never worry about being a woman or not a woman. Sometimes my gender helps me sometimes it hurts me. You have to figure out how to get from here to there. If someone doesn't let me into a mosque because I'm a woman, well, then I'll go to a woman's home where she's praying. It's about doing the job. Say the job is to photograph prayer on Friday at the mosque. Just because I cannot get into the mosque doesn't mean that the picture of the woman praying in her home isn't stronger. More than 1,000 men are praying in the mosque and a woman is praying alone. Face the challenges and never accept the word 'no.' I never tell my editors I couldn't do it. My editor knows I will try my absolute hardest to get the story for him. You need to do everything possible to get the job done. That's the kind of confidence your editors must have in you. That's the kind of confidence.

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