The McGill program is funded by the McGill Lecture Endowment. Contributors include the Knight Chair in Health and Medical Journalism.
Excerpts from four group discussions:

- The Courage of Storytelling
- The Sports Writer’s Challenge: Taking on the Beloved Institution
- Editorial Cartoons: The Impact of an Evolving Craft
- The Truth-O-Meter: False Balance and the Promise of Fact-Checking

Note: This report was written by JoAnn Anderson. The report is online at www.grady.uga.edu/mcgill, click on the Symposium button

Wednesday, October 24, 2012

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Welcome

**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 fifth year, is an outgrowth of the McGill Lecture.

For 34 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.

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 seven McGill Visiting Journalists for a six-hour discussion.

**Topics will include:**

“The Courage of storytelling”

“The sports writer’s challenge: Taking on the beloved institution”

“Editorial cartoons: The impact of an evolving craft”

“The Truth-O-Meter, false balance and the promise of fact-checking”

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 Courage of Storytelling

McGill Visiting Journalists

Andy Miller, Georgia Health News
Eli Sanders, Associate editor, The Stranger

Moderator
Patricia Thomas, professor, University of Georgia

Andy Miller knows the need for quality healthcare journalism is more vital than ever. As the creator of Georgia Health News, a nonprofit independent news site, Miller tries to inform the public about state health issues -- even as traditional media outlets stop their own health coverage because of newsroom budget cuts.

Miller expressed that as “healthcare only gets more important, we’re using more healthcare programs, and expenses keep going up. These are very much financial and economic issues.” Because of this, “the need for healthcare journalism is bigger than ever, but resources are down, and online sites are trying to fill in the gaps.”

It’s this same kind of courage in storytelling that Eli Sanders understands. As the associate editor of The Stranger, a Seattle-based weekly, he received a Pulitzer Prize this year for his feature writing on “The Bravest Woman in Seattle,” a harrowing narrative of a woman’s courtroom testimony of her survival in a brutal attack that killed her partner. Being able to do this kind of investigative courtroom reporting is becoming increasingly scarce, Sanders said.

“In terms of being able to do it in the first place is rare, and wonderful of our paper for me to sit in the courthouse and report it,” Sanders said. “Like Andy is saying that health journalism is being decimated, it’s the same with courthouse reporting. And I got some calls from some courthouse reporters who were like glad the story was being written.”

McGill Fellow Jacob Demmitt asked about how website statistics affect news coverage. “Any downside to having things like page views -- do you know what’s not going to be read or what’s popular? Do you pay attention to those statistics?”

Miller said that investors want to see eyeballs, and page views are not always the best determinant of who is reading because online sharing cannot always be tracked. “I think at times our stories make a difference in terms of discussion across the state. I’d rather have that impact than a marginal tick in hits.”

Fellow Maura Friedman asked, “Are there tactics you use to make sure there are more eyes?”

Sanders explained The Stranger posts stories in print and online through various channels, including social media and through the news site’s blog. “It goes up to relevant and not so relevant people. You have to give your stories a good push out into the world now. And you also have to give a way to share it.”

Demmitt asked Sanders about when to draw the line in stories that had very graphic, violent details, such as Sanders’ feature.

Sanders said it was something every journalist should figure out in writing. “I didn’t want people to get numb to it, but I didn’t want to stop writing it,” explaining that the woman’s case compelled Sanders to write a story that an audience would feel they have a duty to read it.

“I tried to walk up to the line but not go over it. I didn’t want to be salacious or exploit … But at the same time, I didn’t want readers to be off the hook on this one. It was important for me to not do that,” Sanders said.
Fellow Parys Grigsby asked Miller about the backlash for his story about Sarah, a woman whose death in a Georgia hospital exposed staffing and neglect issues in state mental health facilities. “It seems like a story that drew a lot of emotions. Were there a lot of emotions at the facility -- what were the reactions?”

Miller said, “We had literally hundreds of emails and calls about we’re glad you did this story, this happened to be my story. The state government was quiet for months until the Justice Department got involved. The story prompted a response about the hospital care from the governor’s office after the state’s hired consulting firm confirmed the story’s report, Miller said. “The governor’s office hoped it would go away. The governor came around and realized how bad the problem was after a couple years.”

Fellow Elayna Rose asked Miller how to approach hospital employees for interviews and information.

Miller said that many sources wanted to tell their stories, but did not want to release their names, so background research confirming source information was important.

“We could have done just Sarah’s story, but we wanted to find out more. Was this just a bad night at one hospital, or was this a systemic problem?” Miller said.

Amanda Dixon asked if Miller saw changes in the healthcare system as a result of his reporting. “It’s obviously a big political issue now. One of the biggest social justice issues is, what do we do about people with pre-existing conditions? However you sit politically, how that plays out is important,” Miller said. “If I can show readers about these problems and illuminating stories with a face on them, that’s what I want to do and that’s our mission.”

Moderator Patricia Thomas asked about the new journalistic model and what the future held for sites like Georgia Health News and The Stranger.

Sanders explained the online platform allowed for stories to be more in-depth. “Another thing you can do online is slowly unravel things over time. Slowly pick over a subject until it gets to your readers.”

Miller said that more room to write on the Internet is important for complicated issues like healthcare. “When I was at the AJC (Atlanta Journal-Constitution), I would get 12 inches just for Medicare and Medicaid. But the beauty of the Internet is that you’ve got room. Not to say that you want to write a hundred inches on something that needs 20, but health is not that easy of an issue to break down in a short amount of time. You can write an accident on a highway, that’s straightforward. But managed care; HMOs -- that takes a little bit of space and fits online.”

Sanders explained the future business model for journalism is still unknown, but it was important for news sites to find alternative revenue streams, such as the Washington Post recently purchasing an assisted living facility.

Fellow Stephen Morgan asked about the impact of stories like Sanders’ “The Bravest Woman in Seattle” and the impact on sources.

Miller said, “This might be heretical to journalism, but if I’m talking to someone off the streets with a health condition, someone who is not in the newspaper often and is not a public figure, they’re leery of what they will say. I will make sure what they’re saying is something they’re comfortable before I publish. But it’s different with the governor” or other public figures, he said.

Sanders added, “Don’t worry too much about afflicting the comfortable, but do worry about comforting the afflicted.”
Selena Roberts is not afraid of taking risks in sports journalism -- even if it means facing the wrath of Lance Armstrong and his legions of lawyers and devoted fans.

As a former sports journalist for Sports Illustrated and the New York Times, Roberts covered illegal steroid use in the sports industry at a time when performance-enhancing drugs were a relatively unknown topic among sportswriters and fans. Roberts was one of the very first writers to report on Lance Armstrong's steroid use, which was difficult because of the athlete's mythological standing to his loyal fan base as a champion cyclist, cancer survivor and philanthropist through his Livestrong brand. Roberts is now the creator and editor of Roopstigo, a sports journalism website that launched this year.

Moderator Vicki Michaelis asked, “How was it to report on that Armstrong story? What kind of treatment did you receive, and what courage did it take to plug along on that story?”

“One thing you have to understand is Lance Armstrong not like any athlete in our society,” Roberts said. “He had an incredible political machinery because of Livestrong. It did a lot of good work, but a lot of good for Lance Armstrong, and he had access to powerful people in our society.”

Roberts explained that reporting on Armstrong came with a lot of risks, including legal pushback from Armstrong and his supporters who threatened Roberts’ job.

“[Armstrong] felt like he would have the power to call any editor at any magazine or newspaper and demand a story would not run and demand coverage would change. ‘Don’t you understand? I’m an American hero’ would be the subtext of that. It seems like it wouldn’t work, but it’s very powerful. You would hope news editors wouldn’t look the other way and say we’re not going to play your game, but many of them did. He used Livestrong as a shield against scrutiny.”

Michaelis asked how much courage it took to go up against a system like a sports fan base.
“Sports are very much like politics, but Woodward and Bernstein would have a heck of a time as sports reporters,” Roberts said.

“In politics, if you go after truth, there’s someone to have your back. In politics, there’s a safety net. In sports, people treat that world as their escape, and they get mad, get angry and have passion for athletes.”

Roberts explained this unconditional love grows deeper as fans believe that with social media, they really understand and have more access to the athletes they follow.

Fellow Parys Grigsby asked, “How has the reaction changed to your reporting now that evidence has come out to say it’s all true?”

“We’re not in it to hear that we’re right. We’re here to get the truth out,” Roberts said, adding that it is important to always look for the next story.

However, the stories did affect how some sports writers viewed the athletes they covered. “A lot of columnists who were sort of dedicated to the Armstrong myth began to think, ‘I guess we had this all wrong.’ A lot of columnists said that about Penn State as well, we had this all wrong. But also it is important to remember that these are flawed human beings we’re covering.”

Fellow Julia Carpenter asked about newsroom resistance from editors and writers to cover the story. “You hope that others will carry a pitchfork for you, but when you work for a big media institution there’s a bottom line involved,” Roberts said. “It’s unnerving, because you don’t want to your editors to cave to this guy. But editors are humans too, and when they’re threatened by someone as powerful as Lance, they think, is there some information we should soften or take out?”
Fellow Kavi Vu asked, “How were you directly affected after the story was published by lawyers and press?”

Roberts explained there was backlash as “A lot of columnists and fans were still believers. You cross the other side, where commenters say things and wish ill will to you. And columnists write, ‘Here is the greatest guy on earth and nothing will change that.'”

Fellow Jacob Demmitt asked if the public appetite for media scandals has gone up, and if sports journalism is feeding that desire. “We live in a referendum Internet world, and every day feels like a scandal, doesn’t it?” Roberts said. “Certain scandals rise above the white noise and demand the public’s attentions and they feel betrayed that everything they believe in and rooted for was pretty hollow.”

Demmitt asked if that was a good thing for instant gratification with salacious news stories. Roberts said, “Instant referendum is not a good thing, if a guy has a bad night. It’s absurd -- it’s absurd we have a culture with anonymous postings and an atmosphere with absurd out-of-context shots.”

Fellow Mariana Heredia asked, “Did you ever have a moment, with the Armstrong story, that ‘This is too much, and I don’t want to write this anymore’?”

“Sports are very much like politics, but Woodward and Bernstein would have a heck of a time as sports reporters,” Roberts said. “In politics, if you go after truth, there’s someone to have your back. In politics, there’s a safety net. In sports, people treat that world as their escape, and they get mad, get angry and have passion for athletes.”

Michaelis asked about the changes to the sports industry with 24-hour news outlets. Roberts said that companies like ESPN have not only offer journalists a path to fame and wealth, but these organizations curry partnerships with athletes, creating corporate conflicts of interest.

“Journalism on the sports side has changed. ESPN has certainly turned journalism on its head by creating sportswriters into celebrities,” Roberts said. It’s part of the reason that Roberts has created Roopstigo, because having an independent sports journalism site will allow more freedom to report important stories.

“Big media is like working at a barge. It’s very difficult to turn and pivot,” Roberts said. “I believe in doing something a different way, to present content that is liberated from a lot of conflicts of interest.”

Valerie Boyd, associate professor of journalism, asked about Roberts’ decision to start her own business and the model behind it.

Roberts explained that the media industry has been “making decisions built on doomsday for journalism, and I’m tired of hearing it,” Roberts said. “Those conversations are pretty damn depressing, if you get into the idea that we’re going down with it. I fear regret more than I fear failure.”

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- Selena Roberts
Editorial Cartoons: The Impact of an Evolving Craft

McGill Visiting Journalists

Clay Bennett, cartoonist for Chattanooga Times Free Press
Bob Davis, editor of the Anniston Star and president of the Association of Opinion Journalists

Moderator

John Greenman, professor, University of Georgia

Clay Bennett begins many of his speeches with an apology.

As a political cartoonist for the Chattanooga Times Free Press, Bennett is used to having a dissenting opinion amidst the conservative politics in his area.

“If no one is offended, then I am doing something wrong,” said Bennett, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his cartooning in 2002. “Fair and impartial journalism has a place in my heart, but not a place in my work.”

But it’s all in the job description for Bennett, an Alabama native who returned to the South after he became bored with cartooning in progressive Boston.

“At its core, editorial cartooning is a negative art form, fueled by anger and alienation,” Bennett said, adding that Tennessee’s politics provide constant fodder for his work. “Five years on the job, the readers are warming up to me,” Bennett said. “If by warm up, you include words like loathing and contempt. But if my mail is any idea, they are paying attention, and that’s all I care about.”

It’s the kind of editorial expression that Bob Davis appreciates. As the editor of the Anniston Star and president of the Association of Opinion Journalists, Davis enjoys the conversations that thoughtful cartoons can produce.

“The best editorial cartoons are a sharp stick in the eye. A lot of them are funny is the first emotion, but he’s not just cracking jokes,” Davis said. “It’s making you think deeper.”

McGill Fellow Julia Carpenter asked, “Have you ever felt you went too far with a cartoon?”

Bennett said that at his work, he receives editorial freedom, which is “completely fine with me, because it’s better than gold to me. But I always sort of have a leash on whenever I start running around too fast or too far, I have to be saved from myself, like a loose dog running around Chattanooga.” He explained he seeks out the opinions of others in the newsroom to help him understand how far to go in a cartoon.

Moderator John Greenman explained that in Grady College, there are many different disciplines, but no programs that explained how to do cartooning. “How do you learn to become a political cartoonist?” he asked Bennett.
“You look at other cartoons, and as you are attracted to good writing, you recognize what was skillfully-plied craftsmanship,” Bennett said. “You look at cartoons and say, Wow, I really like what that guy or girl is doing,” explaining his influences include early Charles Addams and New Yorker cartoons. “Every creative person takes in inspiration like a sponge, and it’s an amalgam of all that.”

Fellow Jacob Demmitt asked how the Internet has affected opinion writing in the news industry, now that readers have more ways to share their opinions.

Davis said he sees readers often adopt a style of writing similar to columnists who spent years crafting their voices.

“They’re taking cues from less that we’re providing journalism, but they’re taking cues from fox news and cable channel, and throwing it back at me. I want to say to take it down and write in your own voice. They’re mimicking what’s out there on their favorite blogs and stations.”

Bennett said, “The biggest of all peeves is that I love that everyone has freedom of press, but I dislike that all these presses are so intent on getting things out, that facts have become the victim here. Truth has become the victim to expedience,” explaining that photographers who Photoshop may only get one shot to make it big, and lose the chance to build up a loyal audience over years.

Bennett also explained that drawing cartoons becomes part of an identity. “Anything so much you do becomes so much of you. It is like a handwritten letter, as opposed to something that was spit off your printer,” Bennett said. “What I do is like getting a handwritten letter. That is me. I put these lines on that paper. It’s very personal for me.”
Fellow Mariana Heredia asked, “What are your motivations for keeping cartoonists now that newspapers struggle?”

Davis explained that his newspaper no longer had one. “I think to be an editorial cartoonist involves different keys: you have to have immense curiosity in how do things work, and how do people interact with these things,” Davis said. “The other is the ability to present it in narrative, and to tell a story.”

Fellow Stephen Morgan asked Bennett about balancing clarity and impact in drawing political cartoons.

“It’s a tightrope you have to walk. Sometimes you feel like you need an extra label to nail it down, sometimes you don’t. I feel like visual storytelling is in its purest form without labels.”

Heredia asked, “When you’re an editor working with words, and cartoonists work with images, how does that work with editing when you’re not usually working with images?”

“It’s a strange relationship because we’re like the left and right sides of the brain and we’re trying to find the same synapse,” Bennett said. “Some editors say ‘No, that’s not proper English,’ and I say ‘Yes, it’s dialect.’ In cartoons, you have to write how people talk by breaking grammatical rules.”

Davis said his newsroom once had a cartoonist from Switzerland, and having to explain Alabama’s regional intricacies-- with its Johnny Reb Confederate history and dialect -- was difficult. “It makes no sense. That’s the language of cartooning. It’s an economy of symbols and words.”

Demmitt asked what tools Bennett used for readers to understand the punch line.

“Just my own sense of how eyes move in Western culture. If I worked at an Arabic paper or in Japan, it would be a different orientation. Sometimes you can do it all at once. Some are so simple you don’t have to worry about it,” Bennett said.

Moderator Greenman asked, “There’s been a lot of censorship post-9/11, and many newspapers concerned with the idea of looking unpatriotic. Do you have any tension about that, with thinking I have to pull back because it might look unpatriotic?”

“This is a weak description, but it is a visual op-ed. I may edit it, but at the end of the day, I exercise that kind of editing rather than tell them not to run something,” Davis said. “Now, as an editorial editor, no topic is off. If it is, we’re all in trouble.”
The Truth-O-Meter: False Balance and the Promise of Fact-Checking

McGill Visiting Journalists

Bill Adair, creator and editor of PolitiFact
Jim Tharpe, regional editor of PolitiFact, based at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Moderator
Cynthia Tucker, professor, University of Georgia

For Bill Adair, “liar, liar, pants on fire” is more than just a schoolyard chant. It’s a way to keep politicians and other public figures honest about the facts they share.

Adair is the creator and editor of PolitiFact, a project started in 2007 by the Tampa Bay Times and carried out by affiliated media as a way to fact-check politicians, lobbyists and special interest groups. Within PolitiFact is a featured called the Truth-O-Meter, which rates factual claims based on a scale of “True” to “Pants on Fire.” So far, PolitiFact is franchised in 11 states by affiliated media outlets, and everyone -- politicians to even late-night comedians -- have taken notice of the organization’s commitment to fact-checking.

“My goal is every elected official has to face the Truth-O-Meter,” said Adair, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 2008 for national reporting. “And we’re on our way to doing that.”

“We live in a very partisan world, in which the political discussion is up to 11,” said Jim Tharpe, a regional editor of PolitiFact based at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. “We bring it down to 4. It helps the discussion. People like the creature, but not what the creature brings them.”

Moderator Cynthia Tucker asked about upsetting both sides of the political spectrum with fact-checks. “If both sides are angry with me, I’m doing a pretty good job?”

“It’s a by-product of the polarized world. It’s hard to follow the ups and downs of who thinks we’re biased today,” said Adair, who said that both sides often criticize or praise PolitiFact and use PolitiFact’s work in partisan campaigning. “They love us, except when they hate us. That’s life in a world where you’re stirring things up.”

Tucker asked about a recent public fact-check during the second presidential debate, in which moderator Candy Crowley interrupted candidate Mitt Romney on the White House’s response to the Benghazi attacks. “When is it appropriate to be fact-checking or intervening?”

 “[Candy Crowley] did what moderators should do for the truth. Not there to be ‘gotchas,’ but to help get the truth out,” Adair said. “Her mission is the same as PolitiFact’s. It’s a thankless task, to do what they do.”

“The danger in that situation is time,” Tharpe said. “If you listened to Candy, it sounds like Romney is wrong, but it was half-true. Knee-jerk fact-checks are difficult.”
Fellow Jacob Demmitt asked about when politicians get publicly corrected, citing an example in which Herman Cain was corrected on ‘The Daily Show’ when Jon Stewart used the PolitiFact app. “Is that the goal of fact-check and how often does that happen?”

“It happens pretty often,” Adair said. “At the state and local level you see a ‘ya got me,’ and a campaign will acknowledge they got it wrong. What you don’t see is the ‘apology’ tour.”

Fellow Amanda Dixon asked, “What do you think it will take to increase rewards in telling truth in politics?”

Adair said that modern fact-checking did not start until the early 1990s, and now more news organizations are doing it because readers love the content. The first presidential debate this year was the most fact-checked event in history, with news organizations such as the New York Times. “What’s been elusive for us are the micro-targeted messages,” Adair said. “What we don’t know is what we don’t know. What are the messages that they’re sending that we’re not seeing -- direct mail, emails, etc. That’s where the falsehoods are going to concentrate.”

Tharpe explained that PolitiFact is popular on the local level, with politicians in the mayor’s office wanting every speech to be vetted on PolitiFact ahead of time. “It is a part of the national conversation. What impact will it have on politicians’ lying? I don’t know.”

Tucker asked about the complexity of the fact-checks. “Have you ever given up on one?”

“Sometimes ones you think will be simple are very complicated,” said Adair. “There was one about Obama and fuel economy, and I talked to someone on fuel economy. It was so complicated, I spiked the story. We’ve had a fair number like that.”

Fellow Julia Carpenter asked, “How many people are involved in fact-checking, and how long does it take to fact-check the fact-checks?”

Adair explained the evolution of the PolitiFact fact-check, stating that reporters pull together the information and write the piece, and present the evidence like a prosecutor to editors, who interpret the facts.

“There are safeguards in our procedures,” Adair said. “Is the statement literally true? Well yes, it’s literally true. Is there another way to read this statement, or different ways to read the statement? Can we contact the person who said it? And the last is; what is our jurisprudence or previous rulings on this? So that kicks off our discussions.”
Mariana Heredia asked, “You’ve been talking about how people say things around statements. How do you deal with people’s discrepancies?”

“We don’t go back and change the story. We let PolitiFact stand as clarification,” said Tharpe. “We invite people to come in and write statements.”

Adair said they try to fact-check their own columnists, and while they do have some checking efforts in place, PolitiFact doesn’t have the staffing resources to check every letter they publish.

“But it speaks to a philosophy that used to exist -- I used to cover Bush -- that it’s not my duty to correct it as a reporter. More and more beat journalists should correct that,” Adair said.

“Reporters are not catching them all, and it’s a legacy from an era where we were putting up info and lettering readers figure it out.”

“PolitiFact is coming out of that,” Tharpe said. “PolitiFact is coming to a conclusion on truth to this.”

“Do you view a piece produced by PolitiFact as like a traditional news piece, or opinion column, or both, or neither?” asked Ryan Williams.

“It is a neither. It’s a PolitiFact item, but it’s a reporter conclusion. We’re reporting facts, but doing a conclusion, which reporters are not used to doing,” Adair said. “We are a new breed of journalism. In the new media world, we need to be doing more things like that.”

“We are investigative reporting with a subjective conclusion at the end. It’s a new form,” Tharpe said. “I’ve been an editor, I’ve been a reporter. It’s the most difficult thing I’ve ever done. It’s smash mouth journalism. You can’t approach this flippantly. Hopefully it will be around for a while.”

“It’s a very new but necessary form of journalism,” Tucker said.
Participants

Andy Miller, editor and chief executive officer, Georgia Health News, Atlanta, GA
Eli Sanders, associate editor, The Stranger, Seattle, WA
Patricia Thomas, professor, University of Georgia
Selena Roberts, founder of Roopstigo, former senior writer, Sports Illustrated, New York, NY
Vicki Michaelis, professor, University of Georgia
Clay Bennett, cartoonist, Chattanooga Times Free Press, Chattanooga, TN
Bob Davis, editor, Anniston Star, Anniston, AL
John Greenman, professor, University of Georgia
Bill Adair, editor, PolitiFact, Washington, D.C.
Jim Tharpe, editor, PolitiFact Georgia, Atlanta Journal Constitution, Atlanta, GA
Cynthia Tucker, visiting professor, University of Georgia

Julia Carpenter, McGill Fellow, senior, Magazines
Jacob Demmitt, McGill Fellow, senior, Journalism
Amanda Dixon, McGill Fellow, senior, Magazines
Maura Friedman, McGill Fellow, senior, Magazines
Parys Grigsby, McGill Fellow, senior, Journalism
Mariana Heredia, McGill Fellow, senior, Journalism
Jessica Luton, McGill Fellow, graduate student, Journalism
Stephen Morgan, McGill Fellow, graduate student, Mass Media Arts
Elayna Rose, McGill Fellow, senior, Magazines
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