

Martin Kaiser's McGill Lecture, November 4, University of Georgia: "Leading journalists in 2009 – and beyond."

Thank you, thank you. A wise man once cautioned against overly generous introductions of speechmakers because the audience, he said, discovers the truth for themselves soon enough.

Still, thank you, Janice, for those kind words. I'll try to live up to them today.

It is an honor to be here.

Full disclosure: I am not someone who loves giving speeches. But I do love what I do for a living, which gives me opportunities such as this to talk about exceptional journalism.

I'm here also because it is very special to make an appearance – let's not call it a speech yet – that recognizes the greatness of Ralph McGill and his legacy.

Ralph McGill was the conscience of the South – nothing less than its most important journalist of the 20th century.

He wrote every day on almost every subject – about baseball and farming and civil rights and so much more.

He wrote about the South and the world.

He wrote more than 10,000 columns in a career that stretched from the old South to the new South, the South he helped create.

McGill writing in the Atlanta Constitution was taking on the Ku Klux Klan and its violence and its bigotry, but he also was setting the context for his uneasy readers.

As his biographer Harold Martin wrote, McGill insisted "that the Klan was a sucker trap, bringing in poor, deluded, ignorant men who were willing to pay

a ten-dollar entrance fee to be told they and they alone were the defenders of the sanctity of womanhood and the supremacy of the white race.”

McGill felt sorry for these men. But as McGill himself wrote in a column, the Klan also had been infiltrated by “sadists as wicked and cruel as any who ever toiled for Adolf Hitler.”

The reaction of racists to McGill’s columns included death threats, gunshots at his house, cross burnings on his lawn and thousands of angry letters.

Indulge me for a few more minutes of segregationist southern history because this is also personal for me.

More than 60 years ago my uncle, Jim Bellows, just back from World War II, boarded a bus near his parents’ home in Ohio headed for the Deep South, a place he had never been before.

His destination was Columbus, Georgia.

He had landed a job as a reporter at the Columbus Ledger after placing a position wanted ad in Editor & Publisher magazine.

Position wanted ad? Yes, times have changed.

In early 1948, my uncle got the kind of news tip young reporters dream of.

He learned the Klan was planning to hold its biggest meeting in 20 years, on Pine Mountain.

He didn’t bother to tell the bosses. This was HIS big story and he wasn’t going to let some editor give it to another reporter.

He grabbed a couple of other young staffers -- another reporter and a photographer -- to join him.

They secretly watched the Klansmen assemble at an old wooden church and then followed them at a discreet distance 30 miles to the top of Pine Mountain.

Hiding in a ditch only 200 hundred feet from a flaming cross, they watched about 100 men in white robes and hoods.

It was only when Bellows signaled to the photographer to take a few shots that they were discovered.

Quickly surrounded by the mob, their film destroyed, the three journalists were forced to each drink a pint of liquor and jabbed with Hypodermic needles.

They passed out and were placed in positions that suggested sodomy.

A Klansmen took photos. The police arrived quickly because either they took off their Klan robes or were alerted by the Klan.

The journalists were driven to town, booked for drunkenness and thrown in a cell.

The story went national, although McGill led the charge, with his paper editorializing, "The outrage was an unspeakable brutality, so diabolical in its scheme that it could have been conceived only by a sadistic pervert and executed by beasts in human form."

However, justice wasn't done. The Klan fought back against accusations, calling the story a "hoax," and the FBI begged off even though it knew some of the Klansmen urged killing the three journalists.

Nearly 20 years later, we learned that J. Edgar Hoover kept the FBI out of the case on grounds that the property was Klan-owned and the newspapermen hadn't been invited to the party.

Bellows' paper, the Columbus Ledger, initially said it would defend the journalists, but later reneged.

The three journalists were convicted on charges of drunkenness.

That conviction remains on the books today.

But it didn't stop my uncle from working in Georgia.

He moved up in 1950 to Atlanta, where Ralph McGill became one of his mentors, and eventually to New York, to edit the storied New York Herald Tribune, which became perhaps the greatest writers newspaper of all time.

His stable of writers included Tom Wolfe, Jimmy Breslin, Gail Sheehy and others who pioneered the so-called new journalism's narrative style.

The paper couldn't survive a crippling strike, and Bellows went on to a long career in newspapers, TV and even Internet start-ups in his 80s.

But the highlight of his career, he always said, was editor of the Herald Tribune.

Small world: The night he was told he would become editor of the Herald Trib, he was having dinner in New York City with Ralph McGill.

When I accepted the invitation last spring to speak here today, my next phone call would have been to my uncle to talk about Ralph McGill.

Except that my Uncle Jim, a legend in our business and a much-loved role model for me, had died only a few days earlier.

Thank you for letting me honor him today in the state where he began his career.

That was then; Journalism then and journalism now seem worlds apart, separated by vastly more than chronological time.

Many – no most – of the changes that have happened over the past decades have enriched journalism's continuing conversation with the citizens it serves.

But what really changed everything for newspapers was the Internet, that technological marvel we use for hours every day – not just for entertainment, but for news and information.

The Internet exploded our business model, even before the Great Recession hit last year.

Once, we had the exclusive franchise if you wanted to buy or sell a house, buy or sell a car or get a job.

Now, most of those classified ads are gone, along with the millions in revenue they used to generate.

Circulation has dropped, too, in part because many people only bought us for those classifieds. They didn't care about the rest of the paper.

Circulation has also taken a big hit because people can read us for free online.

What's interesting is that the readers we have held onto have been willing to pay more for the paper.

These are the people who value our journalism and are willing to pay to read it on paper.

Add these people to our online and mobile readership and we arguably have more readers than ever before.

But that doesn't solve the business model problem.

It may change in the future, but for now online advertising revenue is minuscule compared to the revenue during the monopoly days of classified advertising.

No matter the business model of the future, to survive we must take greater chances, be more creative and nimble, use new technology and be more entrepreneurial.

In the process, however, we better not lose sight of what got us here and what should drive us moving forward.

We need to remember, every day, that the seismic shocks in our business haven't shaken the foundations of journalism.

Our obligation, then and now, is to truth as best we can determine it through reporting that stands up to careful scrutiny.

The best journalists will always be first and foremost story tellers – telling stories that uncover new information and shine a light where there was once darkness.

All the new technology in the world won't change that.

What we must do is invest in people with integrity, character and talent – and yes, in that order – who can pursue the kind of journalism that strengthens our communities.

The easy example of this kind of reporting is the annual Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. Just think of the last two winners. The Las Vegas Sun won this year for its exposure of the high death rate among construction workers on the Las Vegas Strip, which led to changes in policy and improved safety conditions.

And the Washington Post won last year for exposing the mistreatment of wounded veterans at Walter Reed Hospital, evoking a national outcry that produced reforms that changed the way the VA does business.

It takes courage to do this kind of work, the kind of courage Ralph McGill displayed in the late 1950s when he was honored with a Pulitzer for editorial writing. McGill wrote powerfully about the bombing of a Jewish Temple in Atlanta, and I quote:

"Let us face the facts. This is a harvest. It is the crop of things sown.

“It is the harvest of defiance of courts and the encouragement of citizens to defy law on the part of many southern politicians.

“It will be the acme of irony... if any of four or five southern governors deplore this bombing.

“It will be grimly humorous if certain state attorneys general issue statements of regret.

“And it will be quite a job for some editors, columnists, and commentators, who have been saying that our courts have no jurisdiction and that the people should refuse to accept their authority, now to deplore (this act).

"It is not possible to preach lawlessness and restrict it...

"When leadership in high places...fails to support constituted authority, it opens the gates to all those who wish to take law into their hands...

“The extremists of the citizens’ councils, the political leaders who in terms violent and inflammatory have repudiated their oaths and stood against due process of law have helped unloose this flood of hate and bombing.

“This too is a harvest of those so-called Christian ministers who have chosen to preach hate instead of compassion.

“Let them now find pious words and raise their hands in deploring the bombing of a synagogue.”

Forgive an unprofessional reaction: WOW!

These three examples are what journalism at its best is all about.

Yes, I know, the first two are different from the last, but make no mistake, Ralph McGill was a reporter at heart and it was at the core of his writing.

I cringe when I hear people refer to “the media,” which seems to lump reporters and news editors together with commentators, who do little reporting and truth seeking.

As Nicholas Lemann, dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University has called it -- there is the “reporting media” and the “commenting media.”

We mix and match reporting and commentating at our peril.

The trend to do so, I believe, is a key reason the public's trust in quote-unquote "the media" has slipped in recent years as the number of commentators grows and the number of reporters shrink.

Reporting employs verification and fairness to seek the truth.

The screaming of commentators' opinions and the blather about balanced news coverage has little to do with seeking the truth.

Reporting comes from working sources, asking questions and trying to learn more.

It isn't pontificating on talk shows or blogs.

The best reporters always seem to have the most curiosity, always asking how can I know more, ... what am I missing, ... what are the most important details, ... how do I provide context and clarity, ... what are the shades of gray that so often enter stories so I can understand them and put all the information together and the courage to tell the truth.

But even the best news organizations, the ones dedicated to genuine reporting, the truth seekers, even they are in a fight for survival these days.

So what do we do?

What I can tell you is what the journalists are doing in the newsroom of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and some of the success we have had.

Keep in mind that the Journal Sentinel has been No. 1 or No. 2 in Sunday newspaper penetration for the last 10 years and in the top 8 in daily penetration.

Also we are an independent newspaper, not part of a large chain carrying a heavy-debt load.

Still, we are struggling financially.

Despite these problems and because nobody seems to have all the answers, I would argue that this is a liberating time – a time to embrace what attracted us to this profession.

Inside me is still the kid who spent his allowance on newspapers, brought them home, read them -- fascinated by the world around me --- cut them apart and pasted them up to create my own newspapers.

When I entered my first newsroom as a lowly copyboy -- it was love at first sight.

I still come to the newsroom today as excited as ever.

Now even when I leave at night, I have my wireless laptop and my iPhone to still be part of the newsroom.

What could be better than the opportunity to tell stories working with talented and creative people --often with amazing personalities.

The journalists I work with haven't given up despite the industry's hardships. They bring a passion and joy to their work.

Isn't that what life should be about?

It is truly a gift to be the editor of a news organization.

It comes with responsibility.

It requires courage to make communities better.

It is humbling.

What matters in the future is not the survival of newspapers or TV or radio or even the Internet.

The delivery system doesn't matter.

What matters is the survival of journalism, reported journalism, that tells the truth with courage and connectedness to the communities it serves.

As I said, we don't have all the answers in Milwaukee and I'm not here to tell other news organizations what to do.

To have a future, we believe at the Journal Sentinel we must do more than just report what happened.

We have to explain why with expertise and go deeper with investigative and enterprise reporting that is relevant to our community.

One way we do this is to create a newsroom culture that encourages us to be the public's watchdogs, holding public officials and institutions accountable.

Years ago I read a line by an editor who urged his staff to, "get caught loving your community."

It stuck with me.

It's the ability to create a sense of place online or in the paper, a place that connects journalists to their community and visa versa.

We need to be a part of people's lives, on the things that are closest to them – their kids, their health, what they do for entertainment, and more. We need to tell the success stories.

This gives journalists the freedom to be critical, holding officials and institutions accountable, doing what readers expect us to do – NOT as outsiders lecturing the community. We are part of the community.

But in an era of shrinking resources, editors have to make choices, sometimes painful choices, based on what we think is most important to our communities.

When we talk in the Journal Sentinel newsroom we emphasize four areas that we believe are critical to our future.

The first is the investigative and enterprise reporting based on expertise that I have been talking about.

The work serving the community and exposing the truth inspires our journalists.

They have been rewarded by our readers and by more journalistic honors than many of them ever dreamed of winning, including a Pulitzer Prize and three Pulitzer Prize finalist recognitions in recent years

This focus makes our newsroom spend more time concerned about our craft and less time complaining about the business problems of the industry that we often can't control.

Here is a video that shows how and why we started an investigative team. I love new ideas and making changes that improve and energize the newsroom.

The video helped us win the Associated Press Managing Editors Innovator of the Year Award last year.

(VIDEO GOES HERE).

Our goal is to give readers stories with impact that tell them something they don't know and explain why something is happening and what can be done about it

A sample of a few of the stories we have reported recently are:

An ongoing investigation into the \$350 million taxpayer-financed child-care system known as Wisconsin Shares.

We uncovered a trail of phony companies, fake reports and shoddy oversight including a woman who had scammed the system for nearly \$3 million in government money that helped pay for a 7,600-foot square mansion, which includes an indoor swimming pool, an indoor basketball court and a Jaguar convertible in the driveway.

The outcry from readers has forced lawmakers from both parties to make an audit of Wisconsin Shares a top priority.

Another recent investigation found that at least 22 Milwaukee County children in foster care have died from 2004 to 2008 despite clear warning signs to the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare they were at risk.

Among the 22 were an 18-month-old boy whose mother starved him to death and a 5-month-old who drowned during an unsupervised visit with his mentally unstable mother.

Since we reported on the first victim, a 13-month-old, the bureau has been overhauled and for the first time in more than a decade, according to the department, no child has died in 2009 and the number of children abused or neglected is the lowest since the bureau was created in 1998.

In another series, this one of national importance, we explained how our patent system – the legal foundation of America's genius for creativity – is being undermined by the government itself.

The U.S. Patent Office is plagued by backlogs, dysfunction and diversion of fees.

In the last year since that video was made we have continued our reporting on the failure of regulators to assess the risks of Bisphenol A, better known as BPA, and other potentially hazardous chemicals.

Our reporting was applauded in editorials in the New York Times and Washington Post and has been the focus of Congressional investigations.

For the last year our in-depth reporting has exposed Wisconsin's culture of alcohol.

Wisconsin has the most lenient drunken driving laws in the country – it's only a traffic ticket the first time a drunken driver is convicted -- and Wisconsin has one of the highest death rates from drunken driving.

Our initial series was called "Wasted in Wisconsin" and we followed the series with what we called "Sobering Reminders" – a story each day for 72 straight days – one story on a person killed from drunken driving from every county in the state.

The state legislature is now reacting with new legislation to toughen the laws.

The positive response from readers to these stories and many others has been greater than anything I have seen in my career.

I'm not saying the encouragement from readers will ensure our future.

In fact, part of the response may be our readers' fear of the demise of newspapers.

Here's what a few of them have e-mailed:

"On reading the first installment of your remarkable new series on Wisconsin's welfare child-care scandal, the first thought that came to both my husband and me was: THANK GOD FOR NEWSPAPERS." Those last four words she put in capital letters.

Another reader wrote, "Your current series about fraud in the Wisconsin Shares program is mind-blowing. And if you hadn't done the legwork, and suffered through the interviews, and obtained quotes and photos and, perhaps, even threats to your life and property, we would never know. And nothing about it would be changed."

Yet another wrote about the alcohol series, : "On your great reporting in the 'Wasted in Wisconsin' series – if that doesn't wake people up, sadly, maybe nothing will."

And lastly there is this email after the Wednesday, Oct. 21 front page showing how legislature was reacting to our reporting.

The letter to the editor read:

“The headline "A day of reforms" on the front page was a reminder to us of how fortunate we in Wisconsin are to have the Journal Sentinel as the state's premier newspaper.

“The staff's coverage of local and state issues is second to none and an important source of information for all concerned citizens. We believe issues such as those raised by the investigations "Cashing in on Kids" and "Fatal Care" would never receive the quick response from state government without the superior and valiant coverage by Journal Sentinel reporters. And how about the series on the condition of Lake Michigan and the other Great Lakes? Terrific!

“Last evening, we watched a televised discussion between two university journalism professors concerning the ills that have beset newspapers. The two professors were in agreement that local and regional papers were certain to fail in this economy if they did not increase their emphasis on local issues of interest.

“We would suggest that, given these criteria, the Journal Sentinel is way ahead of its peers.

“Thank you for looking out for the benefit of all in Wisconsin.”

I've got to tell you, readers like that are what keep us charging ahead.

I mentioned four areas of focus.

Quickly, the other three include multimedia.

We must take advantage of new technology to improve our story telling. It will make us better journalists and better serve our communities.

New technology expands our story telling through online links to key facts, links to original documents, interactive timelines and maps, photo galleries, audio, video, and dozens of more ways. It makes our reporting on paper look so limited.

A third area might fall under the rubric: It's not all about us.

We must allow readers to be part of our work.

News is no longer a one-way street coming from printing presses and TV and radio towers.

News has become more of a conversation.

New technology has strengthened our reporting by allowing us to expand our sources and more easily interact with them.

New technology also helps us be more transparent. This should help us regain trust from readers by being able to show where we get information for stories by using links to documents, interviews and other sources.

Other ways we involve readers can be fun.

During Brewer games our baseball writer blogs what happens each inning; but what brings in readers to his blog are the comments we get from fans during the game and the fact that our reporter responds to some of them.

When the Brewers were in the pennant race in 2008, we were getting more than 1,000 comments during some games.

As you may know, a professional football team called the Green Bay Packers has a fairly enthusiastic following in my state.

So when a former Packers quarterback named Brett Favre – the name may be familiar to you – signed with the Minnesota Vikings, we had some fun by allowing fans to create their own photos of Favre using Photoshop.

We have had almost 2.9 million page views to see the Favre photo illustrations – at least the ones fit for a family Web site -- since they were first posted in July.

Last, but certainly not least, is our focus on immediacy.

It's all about getting it fast and reporting it accurately.

Our goal is to get information online quickly.

The writing sometimes is different than what would appear in a newspaper.

We write what we know and come back and tell readers more when we know it.

The writing is often conversational – here's what we know now and here's what we are trying to find out.

Last year, we built in the center of our newsroom what we call a breaking news hub staffed with journalists from various departments – local news, business news, photo and sports.

The news hub was created to reinforce that we are a multimedia news center operating virtually around the clock.

It looks different from the rest of the newsroom.

There are flat screen TVs so the staff can see how TV and other Web sites are reporting the news and what stories, blogs or other information are bringing people to our Web site.

We are still absolutely committed to our heritage of investigative, explanatory and in-depth reporting, but technology enables us to break news with more urgency than at any time in history, delivering important information when readers want it.

We expect our Web site to be the first place to go for trustworthy information about what is happening right now -- from tornado warnings to election results to traffic conditions.

The philosophy behind our Web site is to make it the place to go to help people with their daily lives and the place to go for in depth knowledge.

We are creating a new culture in our newsroom.

Culture comes from the top – the leaders.

It doesn't come from the bottom up.

It is the responsibility of the editor in charge.

But one person doesn't produce outstanding journalism for a whole newsroom.

What I have learned is that you can teach principles and ethical behavior, but you cannot open a mind to these things if a student lacks character.

It follows then that the most important tasks for a successful leader are the quality of the people he or she hires and the open and honest communication he or she establishes with them.

What I have learned is that the nine most suffocating words in any organization are: "This is the way we have always done it."

Change really is the only constant and managing change skillfully in difficult times is the challenge for all of us in positions of leadership.

To the journalists I work with, it has meant changing and improving even as we have had to reduce the size of our newsroom.

What I have learned is that it is deadening, intellectually and spiritually, if the boss assumes he or she is the smartest person in the room.

There are times, of course, when a leader charts the course of the enterprise through explicit direction.

But an executive does that at great risk if the directive isn't preceded by listening to, understanding and learning from others inside the organization and outside it.

It is a leadership style that promotes courage and love of community

What I also have learned is when enough is enough.

Someone once said that a speech never ends, you just run out time for revisions.

That's where I am now – almost.

But before I thank you for your interest and consideration, let me close by telling you a brief story.

In preparation for today, I e-mailed Ralph McGill's closest friend, Gene Patterson.

A graduate of this university and also a former editor of the Atlanta Constitution, Patterson gave the first Ralph McGill Lecture 30 years ago.

Gene Patterson was called the Lou Gehrig of journalism and Ralph McGill the Babe Ruth by the late Atlanta Journal Constitution president Jack Tarver in author Roy Peter Clark's book, *The Changing South of Gene Patterson*.

I asked Gene what Ralph McGill might say about the today's world and the turmoil journalism is experiencing.

I received this response, and I quote:

"I suspect the Ralph McGill I knew, part poet and part pugilist as he was, might say this about the world as we now know it:

"First, he would lay a calming hand on the Chicken Littles among us newspapermen and remind us the written word will endure no matter what combination of paper or screen we come to deliver it on.

“Second, he would caution serious tellers of consequential news to leave the tweeters and bloggers to paddle about their play pools and instead go deep to plumb the issues that will define our democracy.

“ Finally, I expect race would still top his list of unfinished American stories. I have no doubt he would be shaming the denigrators of African-American achievement by emphasizing the astounding fact that nearly half of African-Americans have already worked their way up from slavery into the American middle class.

“I am confident he would be saying the other half are now owed a hand up by the white majority that deliberately denied them the schooling, the opportunity and the vote that others had.

“And as always, I'd be convinced Ralph McGill was right.”

Thank you one and all.

It was an honor to speak where Eugene Patterson inaugurated this wonderful annual celebration of Mr. McGill and journalism.