

McGill

SYMPOSIUM ON JOURNALISTIC COURAGE



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Grady  College
THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

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Welcome



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

John Greenman: All of my colleagues in the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication want to welcome you to the first McGill Symposium. I think you know the McGill Symposium is an outgrowth of the McGill Lecture. For nearly 30 years, the McGill Lecture has brought significant figures in journalism to the University of Georgia to help us honor Ralph Emerson McGill's courage as an editor.

Round table 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.

The first symposium is today. Twelve 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 what will be a six hour discussion.



The McGill Symposium assembled

Topics will include “When community forces align against you,” which is what we’re starting with; “On assignment in Iraq...and other troubled places;” “The risks journalists face holding powerful interests accountable;” and then “From outrage to outbreaks: Courage in medical reporting.”

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

When community forces align against you

McGill Visiting Journalists

Dean Miller, Nieman Fellow, Harvard University;
managing editor, Idaho Falls Post-Register

Peter Zuckerman, reporter, Portland Oregonian

Moderator

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

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

John Greenman: We open with the topic “When community forces align against you.” In early 2005, The Idaho Falls Post-Register published a series of stories exposing Boy Scout pedophiles and Scout leaders who failed to remove them from the program. In doing so, according to executive editor Dean Miller, the newspaper “energized three of our community’s big forces against us, including those most able to punish our newspaper – the community’s majority religion, the richest guys in town, and the conservative machine that controls Idaho.” We are now joined by Miller and Peter Zuckerman, who reported and wrote the series. Peter is now a reporter at the Portland Oregonian. Our moderator is Professor Conrad Fink.

Conrad Fink: Good morning. I’m delighted to be with you and to moderate this discussion of journalism courage. It’s been a subject of huge importance to me. I have seen courage displayed in incredible ways by journalists who literally risk their lives in pursuit to the public’s right and need to know, and to be frank, I have seen journalists crumble and fade when confronted with the need to be courageous.

As John said, we’re fortunate to have with us this morning two journalists who displayed courage in many ways and 12 journalism students who are curious about what courage is, how do you find it, how do you display it.

Our guests, of course, are Mr. Dean Miller, managing editor of the Idaho Falls Post-Register and currently a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University and Mr. Peter Zuckerman, a reporter at the widely respected Portland Oregonian.

The reporter who faces personal attack, the editor who is required to approve and publish, the publisher who must pay attention to his market position – we’ve got a multi-layered question of courage here.

Dean Miller: It’s awkward to be invited to speak about courage. I don’t actually believe in courage. I think everyone can do this. The moment comes when you have it and I don’t think you need to question that about yourself. If you have the essential humanity to care about other people, then when courage is required you’ll find it. You absolutely will find it.

People crack under pressure. They don’t do beautifully well, but you have all the courage you need. It’s not something you need to develop. You just have to have clarity about what it is you’re doing. The reason I had so much faith in Peter even though he was young and green is because he had no doubts that what we had a hold of had to be told. People had to do something about this problem. It was in their power to fix it and they had to be held accountable.

Fink: To be frank, did you ever waffle in this process? Did you ever say this isn’t worth the risk? Did you ever say to Peter we both got our careers riding on this, let’s back off?

Miller: No. And it’s not because of any great courage on my part. We had court files. The beauty of this story the critics never quite understood is that the whole story was built on sworn depositions. We were just telling people what was in the file to some extent.



McGill Fellows Ugochi Amuta
and Natalie Fisher

Fink: How many times during this process did the publisher come down and say, hey, it's not just your careers that are hanging on this, it's the credibility and authority of my newspaper?

Miller: Here's the really interesting thing about the dynamics of our paper at the time. We are an independent company owned 49 percent by the employees and 51 percent by the family. The former publisher, now president of the company, was running for governor of the state at the time. Not an easy job. So you had those dynamics going on. You had all of our major advertisers save for two who were companies owned by Mormon men who were heavily involved in scouting and so the potential for an ad boycott was quite high. Our publisher is a line hard newsman and he absolutely rode with us until the very end.

Fink: Did you ever wish that Peter Zuckerman was 50 with 25 years of experience instead of 25 years old?

Miller: This is a story that Peter would never have gotten to touch at a bigger paper. It was his and he was forming it. You know, he said let's try and do a narrative because most investigative reporting is, excuse my English, you know, a bunch of long unreadable sentences – 10,000 words of just fact recitation. And so we started with a narrative style story that was really unusual and it's a lot of the reason why we didn't do very well with the awards, in pure journalism awards, because journalism is an enormously conservative industry.

Peter Zuckerman: One thing I'm always thinking as a journalist is that when you're dealing with a story that takes a lot of guts, you can't just weigh how much it's going to stress you out. You also have to weigh what happens if

you don't do the story. Many times the consequences of not doing the story are a lot worse than having to deal with the backlash of doing the story.

Fink: Did you find that the initial publication unleashed new sources and people were emboldened to show their courage by coming forward?

Miller: I call it a tree shaker in our newsroom. It's a really important tactic. If you've got a hold of something and you're having a hard time moving it forward, then there's nothing wrong with publishing what you know because it emboldens sources.

Juanita Cousins: How do you defend the newspaper's credibility against reliable and respected people in the community who say what you're doing isn't correct?

Miller: There are two things: accountability and giving critics a legitimate answer. I think an editor can get drowned in the effort of rebutting every statement. A lot of it you've got to let it ride and you've got to trust that people are smart enough to figure it out and they are.

Natalie Fisher: Would you have drawn the line at some point? If someone working on the story got beat up in street, would you have decided to not do it?

Miller: Everybody's got a different line on how far they want to take themselves into danger and their family. Peter had a partner of five years at the time. Dillon was in town with Peter and he was making decisions for his partner. I was newly married. So you've got to be thoughtful about that. You've got an ethical obligation to the people you love.

Fink: I'd like to move this into another dimension. How did you prepare your publisher to have courage at this moment? Did you take him step by step? How did you inject this guy with courage?

“Many times the consequences of not doing the story are a lot worse than having to deal with the backlash of doing the story.”

—Peter Zuckerman

Miller: We used two important pieces of information from the findings of the Readership Institute at Northwestern University with regard to what new readers are interested in. The best news in a long time is that the single most powerful experience that brings readers back to a newspaper is if they feel the paper looks out for their personal and civic interests. Our publisher is already a newsroom guy and he was with us on general terms, but to be able to make this business case for it was hugely powerful.

Marlee Waxelbaum: How do you balance writing in the best interest of your subjects versus in the best interest of the community?

Zuckerman: That's an excellent question. One way to figure it out is to do the most good with the least amount of harm. To some extent it's a guess, but you can gather as much information as possible to make an informed decision. I tend to think, "What's in the best interest of the readers and of the stakeholders in the story? What's at stake here? What can we do to minimize harm?" To minimize harm to the Boy Scouts, we wouldn't have published anything. It is a tricky balance because most people don't want to be the poster boy or poster girl for rape. On the other hand, when you hide someone's name, it makes the incident sound like such a horrible crime. I said to people, "Are you comfortable with this?"

What helped is that I would read them back the part of the story that included them. I think it gave people a lot more courage to be able to use their name. When you don't know how you're going to be portrayed, it's a lot scarier. I wouldn't read the whole story to them.

Waxelbaum: Did they ever ask you to change anything?

Zuckerman: I told them they couldn't. I told them this is my story. I can't let you line edit me. I need to know if there's anything that's inaccurate and if you'll permit me to do it.

Miller: Read backs have gotten a bad rap. They take a lot of strength. But it's like saying, "I'm the journalist writing this thing. I'm telling it as I understand it from all of my work. I want you to save me from stupidity. Wrong dates, wrong names, wrong places."

Fink: Is there a dollar sign on courage?

Miller: There's a saying on my wall by a Blackfoot Indian that says, "The wolf hunts with what teeth he's got." Don't get me started, but our elders in this business have done us a real disservice because they came through probably during the fattest, wealthiest time in journalism's history and because the softball team at the Philadelphia Inquirer can no longer play softball in China, people are freaking out and saying all is lost. The

fact is that a lot of newsrooms are awfully fat and there are an awful lot of journalists who write once a month. Good journalism can still be done. We've always worked for people who care most about the bottom line. You've still got to do your best and if you don't like it, get out.



McGill Visiting Journalist Dean Miller

Emily Yocco: As you're going through this day-to-day of writing things, was it a question of courage? Or were you just like you said publishing an uncomfortable truth? Was it not later when you were winning these awards that you realized, wow, what I did was kind of courageous?

Zuckerman: That's a very good summary. I think while it's happening, you never think, "Ooh, I'm courageous." You're thinking, "Oh, my gosh, I hope we get through this." I'm more thinking I hope I do this well and that I don't really hurt somebody and make a big mistake. That's what was mostly going through my mind. I'm not thinking, you know, what would Woodward and Bernstein do?

Fink: I just want to clarify one point. You said earlier that you don't believe in courage. I've heard courage demonstrated here in about eight or nine different ways. It's a matter of semantics, perhaps, but I think courage has been on the table here today.

Miller: I don't believe in courage. I believe in clarity. I believe you choose the business you're in. You know, whether you're engineering bridges or whatever, I tell people who come to work for me that none of us are slaves. You chose to be here and I expect you to come to work every day with that mindset. If you're don't like what we do, there's no shame in going and doing something else. But this stuff is part of the job of doing what we do.

"I think while it's happening, you never think, 'Ooh, I'm courageous.' You're thinking, 'Oh, my gosh, I hope we get through this.'"

– Peter Zuckerman



McGill Visiting Journalist Peter Zuckerman



Moderator Conrad Fink

On assignment in Iraq...and other troubled places

McGill Visiting Journalist

Moni Basu, staff writer, Atlanta Journal-Constitution;
Ochberg Fellow, Dart Center for Journalism and
Trauma

Moderator

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

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

Valerie Boyd: Moni, how did you find your way to becoming a journalist?

Moni Basu: I went to work for a small community newspaper in Tallahassee, Fla. Working for a small paper in the mid-1980s before computers and pagination allowed me to learn every facet of the business. In fact, when Hurricane Kate hit Tallahassee in 1985, I actually got on my bicycle and rode in the middle of the storm with the negatives to the Tallahassee Democrat which had the printing press. The generator running at the Tallahassee Democrat at the time could not generate enough energy to run the broadsheet presses. So only the tabloid paper came out the next morning and that was our paper.

Boyd: So that bike ride made you decide you liked stories with a bit of danger to them?

Basu: That's when I realized there's no other feeling like it. Every time you go out to cover a story you never know if you will come back to your trailer or hotel room alive. The thrill of that experience keeps a lot of journalists going back to these kinds of stories.

Boyd: A war zone is fraught with its unique challenges. Can you talk a bit about that?

Basu: Yes. I don't know how many of you know, but The Atlanta Journal-Constitution recently underwent a major reorganization. Like a lot of newspapers, we downscaled. We no longer had the national, metro, business, sports and other traditional departments. Instead we had two departments: digital and print. The former focuses solely on the online product and enterprise, while a group of reporters and editors in the latter work solely with print in mind. It was a terrible time in the newsroom. Two days after the editor announced this change, I was on a plane to Kuwait and missed the major reshaping of the newsroom.

One of the things I really, really like about Iraq is the freedom I have as a reporter. All good journalists will tell you to never spend a majority of your time in the newsroom. But Iraq took that to new dimensions. In the war zone, every morning I got up and made serious life and death judgments about what I would be doing that day. What is the story I want and can I get it without being killed? If I get killed, the story's not going anywhere.

If you asked me to break up my day, I probably spend 80 percent of my time figuring out how I will get a story. I spend maybe 15 percent of my time getting the story and then five percent consists of writing and editing. This is very, very different from a reporter in a regular newsroom.

Boyd: Talk about the specific challenges you face as a woman and a woman of color.

Basu: Well, I stayed mostly with infantry units because those units go outside the base and see action. The infantry units are, of course, all male. Women aren't allowed into infantry units in the U.S. Army. I spent the bulk of my time with a Georgia National Guard brigade. The guys didn't want me with them because they saw me as a liability. "Not only is she a journalist. On top of that, she's a girl. She's not going to be able to carry her weight if something happens." So not only was I in an environment with bombs and shooting, but I was also dealing with people who didn't trust me, who didn't see me as one of their own.

I did a story about a platoon sergeant from Athens who wrote these incredibly poignant letters to his 3-year-old daughter, Zoe. When I got to his unit, everybody said, "Hey, you need to talk to Sergeant Eaton. He's a really different kind of guy." Well, Sergeant Eaton wouldn't give me the time of day. I told the company commander I wanted to be put on Sergeant Eaton's battle roster every day. That meant every day at 6 a.m., I got into his Bradley Fighting Vehicle and went out into Abu Ghraib where they were patrolling at the time. Over the course of two or three weeks, Eaton noticed, "Hey, here's a girl who's willing to take all the chances my men are taking." He started opening up to me. In the end, I got the best story I've written from Iraq because it showed this whole other side that usually we don't see in newspapers.



McGill Fellow Bradley Alexander

Marlee Waxelbaum: How do you capture – how do you write those stories on a day-to-day basis?

Basu: The last few trips I've gone back to Iraq I've realized I'm only one person. I'm not CNN. I'm not the New York Times. I'm not going to break the news about Petraeus' latest surge plan. The advantage that staying with one unit gave me was that I could observe the same group of soldiers over a period of time and in turn they got to know me. The key that you need to write these stories is trust. The soldiers need to be able to trust you to tell their stories and you don't get it if you just spend two days with them. You get it by doing what they're doing day after day after day.

Geoffrey Graybeal: What is it like in terms of encountering other journalists over there?

Basu: The U.S. Army started the embed program in 2003. I think at one time there were 610 embedded journalists working in Iraq. That number now has dwindled to maybe 10 or 12 and a lot of it is because papers like the Washington Post have gone through all their veteran reporters. Everybody has done two or three tours. They even started sending their suburban Maryland school reporters. Now the Post has started hiring contract reporters in Iraq.

Some of it is just Iraq fatigue in newsrooms. When newspapers don't have a reporter there, Iraq becomes a briefs column: developments in Iraq today. Twelve soldiers died, 31 Iraqis died, and the government announced blah, blah, blah, you know, and that's it. We've become so local-centric that if you can't tell the story through a local prism, readers are not interested. Readers connect a lot more when they read about Billy Bob from Athens than someone they can't relate to.

Kimberly Davis: We've seen soldiers blogging and writing vivid letters home that are then posted online. How has the shift from journalists primarily telling stories to the soldiers telling them impacted your work?

Basu: It's had a great deal of impact on our work. First of all, any journalists going to the war zone are also writing daily blogs. The last four trips to Iraq I've written a daily blog even if it was just four sentences. I'd post something every day because we have an onslaught of information.

The soldiers' blogs vary from unit to unit. I think with this onslaught of information, a lot of our readers become numb. The challenge to journalists becomes how do you regenerate interest in a war that's going on 8,000 miles away and has little impact on most Americans? Unless you have a family member wearing the uniform, how does war really touch you? It doesn't.

Another part about blogging and the Internet is that journalists are forced to be interactive and savvy online. What you are writing is instantly seen because every soldier has Internet access and the company commanders are also seeing it. So writing becomes a delicate balancing act. You want to write stories that are fair and critical. On the other hand, you don't want to immediately burn the company commander of the unit you're with if you plan to be there for three months.

In 2003 when I went to Iraq, I refused to take one of our embed slots with the 3rd Infantry Division. I didn't want to do it. I rented a Toyota mini-van. The photographer who was with me was Iranian and we blended in. We were like two local women. We had a driver and a translator, and we traveled from Basra in the south to Dohuk in Kurdistan in the north. We went into homes. The stories were unending in 2003 because Saddam Hussein was gone after 24 years in power and there was this fresh new hope and optimism in the country.

When I went back in 2005, I found it would be impossible to do that. I would be killed. This explains the proliferation of this whole network of Iraqi journalists who are working for big American media outlets. If you read a New York Times story, you'll see a byline that says Alissa J. Rubin. But at the bottom of the story, you'll find four or five names who have contributed to that report and those are the people who have gone out into Baghdad to collect information from the bomb site or talk to the family victims.

“In the war zone, every morning I got up and made serious life and death judgments about what I would be doing that day.”

– Moni Basu



McGill Visiting Journalist Moni Basu, and Moderator Valerie Boyd

Emily Yocco: Can you prepare yourself before you go, or do you wait and see who will talk to you for a story?

Basu: In the war zone, you can have a rough idea of what you want to do, but really you have to go with the flow. Last February, I was held for one week in the Green Zone media office. Since I'm not an American citizen, I wait twice as long for approval of my reporter credentials. Well, I wasn't just going to sit there. I asked if I could spend three days in the combat hospital while I waited.

I don't know if any of you have spent time in a trauma room, but the combat hospital at Ibn Sina made Grady Hospital's trauma room look like a kindergarten. The doctors at Ibn Sina kept telling me one thing over and over again: The reason these guys are going home alive is because a medic in the field knew what to do. That's where I got the idea to do the medic story. I had spent almost three months in Iraq on that trip. Soon my stay came down to the last few weeks and I had not found the right guys to do the story with until I got to the Anbar Province.

Scott Reid: Is it ever difficult to avoid bias when you're telling these harrowing stories of people?

Basu: Bias. My rule of thumb is to ask is my story fair. When I'm working in a situation like Iraq, I limit myself to telling the story as I see it happening in front of me. This means that what you learn in journalism school about objectivity and trying to get both sides of the story doesn't necessarily happen. It can't happen in a place like that.

Natalie Fisher: Are there times you feel you could help if you weren't writing?

Basu: That's a really good question. I'll tell you a story. In 2003, the military reporter at the Atlanta Journal Constitution, Ron Martz, was embedded with a unit that led the charge into Baghdad. At one point, heavy fighting was going on in the airport area. Two soldiers in his unit were very badly injured. Ron helped get them on the helicopter. Pictures of that were published in various places, and Ron came under a lot of fire for it. The issue was do you keep writing or do you put down everything and become a human being and help a person who's injured? Ron's argument was first and foremost I'm a human being.

Juanita Cousins: How do you gauge if you should bring out your reporter's notebook, or do you observe that someone hesitates if you bring it out?

Basu: That's a very good question. It varies by situation. At the hospital, for instance, things happened so fast that nobody even noticed I had a notebook. In another situation, I interviewed a woman whose male family members had been killed the night before. She was at first very reluctant to talk. She was scared for her life.

In Iraq, you have to gauge how much danger you put a person in by telling their story. If you publish their name and where they are from, they could be killed because they spoke to an American reporter or said the wrong thing. I have always made sure that they were okay with it.

But, yes, there are times when you don't pull your notebook out right away. To me, the rules are very different when you are dealing with ordinary people compared to public officials who know exactly what to expect from the media. The stakes are even higher when you're talking to someone who has experienced so much trauma.

Boyd: What do you hope will be the legacy of your work?

Basu: I don't know about legacy, but I got an email in Iraq from a reader who has read the Journal-Constitution for 38 years. She had never quite been touched by a story the way she had when she read what I wrote from Ibn, Sina, "The Day in the Life of a Hospital." That's why I keep going back. She went on to say that she also hadn't thought about what was happening in Iraq. She didn't pay attention to the news. But she read that story, and she said, "You know, now I'm going to do think about things a little bit more." I can't tell you how rewarding it is to get an email or a phone call from a reader who otherwise may not have cared. Then they do after reading what I have written. That's why I want to go back.

"When I'm working in a situation like Iraq, I limit myself to telling the story as I see it happening in front of me."

– Moni Basu

The risks reporters face holding powerful interests accountable

McGill Visiting Journalist

Richard Prince, columnist, Robert C. Maynard Institute for Journalism Education, and foreign desk copy editor, Washington Post

Moderator

Janice Hume, associate professor, University of Georgia

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

John Greenman: Welcome back to the afternoon and third session of the McGill Symposium. We're now joined by Richard Prince from the Maynard Institute and the Washington Post and my colleague, Janice Hume, a member of the journalism faculty.

Janice Hume: I think we had a great morning and hope that our vigorous conversation will continue through the afternoon. As a columnist on issues of diversity, Richard Prince has his finger on the pulse of the issues of journalistic courage we are talking about today.

Geoffrey Graybeal: You have a history as an advocate and a journalist. Is there a difference between the advocacy role of the ethnic press versus the role of traditional journalism and objectivity?

Richard Prince: Yes – there is still a big difference. The black and Hispanic press, particularly Latino radio, consider themselves advocates. They help people navigate the bureaucracy. They consider themselves to be more service-oriented to their particular communities and issues.

Kimberly Davis: Do you think the ethnic press comes under fire more often by their readers because the staff chooses to advocate when they see a problem in the community?

Prince: The Washington Post encountered trouble with a series about a woman who suffered every kind of problem. The writer, Leon Dash, lived with this woman for a year and wrote this series. The readers said, "You're not offering any solution to this." The newspaper's response: "It's not our job to give solutions." The ethnic press doesn't subscribe to that philosophy. They believe in squaring the circle and offering vigorous advocacy that will provide solutions.

Moving on to 2003, when I was editor of the Black College Wire, an organization that works with student newspapers at historically black colleges. In that year, some Hampton University students in Virginia wrote about food and cafeteria violations just before homecoming took place and alumni would be there at the college. The provost wrote a response to the story and asked the newspaper staff to place her letter on the front page. The staff explained that the paper did not put letters on the front page. When the paper was printed, campus police confiscated every issue.

This incident is symptomatic of a larger mentality about the black press of "us against them." A reader might say, "If the outside world is kicking us, why do we need the newspaper to do it also?" Faculty and administrators at Hampton called student journalists names or described them as disgruntled and disloyal family members of the college. Through its policies, Hampton is producing leaders that will quickly consent to unfair policies. Graduates of the college will not know how to change their communities.

Hume: You started out talking about journalist Ida B. Wells, who has been credited with causing a black migration from Memphis to Kansas when she said, “If you don’t treat us well, we’re going to take our business elsewhere.” But the African American press doesn’t have that kind of megaphone today. What courage is required to fight the fight when you’re not having that same kind of impact?

Prince: Well, we have the example of the Jena Six story. The black newspapers covered it, but not only the black press. Bloggers, emails and talk radio hosts also helped get everyone knowledgeable about the case.

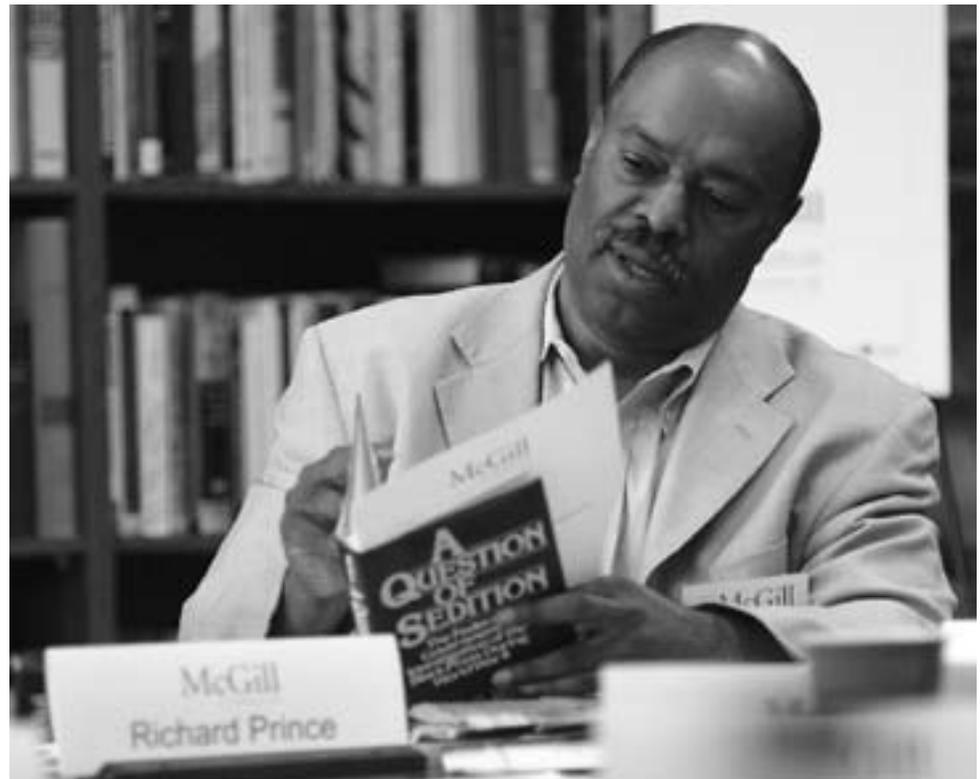
The definition of the black press has changed. Unlike in the days of Ida B. Wells, you have blacks and other people of color in the mainstream media who can push topics like the Jena Six.

Marlee Waxelbaum: You had talked a little about the stoic nature of courage. But it seems like a contradiction to me to be both an advocate and a journalist. A lot of older journalists say, “Don’t get involved in it.”

Prince: I think it depends on the medium that you’re in. The ethnic press does not believe in objectivity – they are basically advocates. But advocacy can take on different coloration. Pardon the pun there. Either you’re advocating for better coverage or you are spotting stories like the Jena Six and covering those.

“The black and Hispanic press, particularly Latino radio, consider themselves advocates.”

– Richard Prince



McGill Visiting Journalist Richard Prince

From outrage to outbreaks: Courage in medical reporting

McGill Visiting Journalists

Margie Mason, medical writer, Associated Press,
Hanoi

Harriet A. Washington, Visiting Scholar at DePaul
University College of Law; author, *Medical Apartheid*

Moderator

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

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

John Greenman: Here we are at the fourth session of our symposium with my colleague in the journalism department, Pat Thomas, and her two guests, Harriet Washington and Margie Mason.

Patricia Thomas: I've had so much fun listening to this. Our subject is from "Outrage to outbreaks: Courage in medical reporting" and it builds on the previous two sessions in some really interesting ways. These speakers have traveled the greatest sum of miles to be with you today. Margie came from Hanoi, Vietnam, and Harriet from the only slightly less exotic New York City.

Both of these ladies are engaged in telling stories that are very difficult to research intellectually and physically as well. I read a quote once from Geneva Overholser, a well-known editor and journalism professor, in which she talked about journalistic courage being "a slow, hard slog." It requires a person to keep reporting things no one wants to hear, or worse, that no one hears even when you do tell. Harriet, I think this description sounds familiar to the narrative of how long you worked, and how difficult it was to write *Medical Apartheid*. Say a little about that.

Harriet Washington: Unfortunately most of the academics with whom I came in frequent contact tried to discourage me from writing the book. I thought, "If there's nothing there, why do people have such a visceral reaction to this?" Maybe there's nothing there, maybe there's something there, but I intended to find out for myself.

Thomas: Margie, what are some barriers you've faced and who has put up road blocks in your way?

Margie Mason: Typically, if we travel outside of Hanoi, the capital, we must request permission. Often when we work, we have a government official with us. It can be intimidating for people in a communist country. But you have to work. You're not in your country and you have to play to a certain extent by their rules. Getting to where you need to go and getting the story is sometimes harder than actually reporting and writing the story.

Thomas: Do you think it is especially hard for you in the field because you're a woman?

Mason: I think I've been fortunate. Generally I try to know when I'm going into a country if there are issues involving women. I touch base with the bureau chiefs and be very aware. I find that if you are courteous and respectful, you earn a lot of respect and people are more willing to work with you. That can mean putting on a head scarf or taking off your shoes when you go into a temple.

Bradley Alexander: Have you been to a place like Burma and felt like you were in danger?

Mason: Well, you've got to pick your battles. You cannot write little snippet pieces that will upset the government. If you want to do a big story on something controversial, then make it a big story.

Geoffrey Graybeal: Did you ever feel a sense of obligation to write this – that perhaps you were the only person who could tell this story in this manner?

Washington: That's what kept me going. I won't say I'm the only one who could have told it, but I was the only one clearly who was interested in telling it. There are medicine historians who I'm convinced could have done a very credible job with this work. But history shows us very clearly that not only were they uninterested in telling it – they were quite interested in not having it addressed at all.

Kimberly Davis: Can you both talk about privilege – the notion of the powerful having the capability to squash stories or say that story cannot or shouldn't be told?

Washington: I didn't have the credentials to work in the area of my research and it was going to be very easy for any academics or doctors to criticize me. "What does she know? She's not a doctor – not a historian." I remember reading this phrase that the difference between courage and heroism is that the latter requires witnesses but courage is between you and God. I had to accept the possibility that my work will be disparaged and sure enough that's what happened. Word began circulating that a message came back to me that there was a journalist writing in a sensationalist tone that's meant to make all researchers look like Satan incarnate.

Mason: Not having a medical background, I come up against many scientists who try to steer me from information and tell me there's no story. Sometimes it's very difficult to reach the people you need and find really good sources. Other times you run across officials, such as people within the ministries of health, who want to help you but they're afraid. AP is really good. No one within the AP ever stop me from doing something unless someone doesn't see it as a story. As a general rule, I'm encouraged to go after what I want to do.

"Often when we work, we have a government official with us. It can be intimidating for people in a communist country. But you have to work." – Margie Mason

Marlee Waxelbaum: Has cost ever prevented you from pursuing a story?

Mason: Cost is always an issue. If I'm proposing a story I need to tell my editors how much the airfare will cost, how long I plan to stay and how much my stay there will cost. If I can present a worthwhile argument that this is going to be a story that will get good play and that we will get a really good ride out of, then I can generally do it. Sometimes cost is an issue because the AP is a huge organization and everybody's competing to do different stories.



Moderator Patricia Thomas



McGill Visiting Journalist
Harriet A. Washington

Waxelbaum: How have you compensated for not having a medical background?

Mason: Well, I have no problem saying to people, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” You have to check your ego. Journalists don’t like to admit that we don’t know things. So I have to be very clear in my head what it is the source is saying. If I’m not, the result could have major repercussions. I can move markets, you know.

Bradley Alexander: To me, an act of journalistic courage is moving your whole life to go work in Asia. What effect has that had on your family? Has it been tough? Do you enjoy doing that all the time?

Mason: That aspect has been very difficult to me because I’m an only child and my father is very sick. Sometimes my mother gives me guilt trips about needing to move closer to home. West Virginians generally are homebodies and so I’m a freak of nature in that I wanted to move abroad. But this work has been very rewarding. This was my dream to be able to find a niche where I can do different things and excel. It’s been an extraordinary experience and I wouldn’t change it for anything.

Matthew Grayson: Do you ever feel that as an AP medical writer, your stories are picked up by newspapers around the world, but don’t appear in the local paper where they would be most crucial?

Mason: Actually, a lot of my stories are published in the local paper. They are translated. But obviously I’m not writing for a local audience. I’m writing for the world and in particular Americans and so I have to tailor my writing much differently. In some ways, doing what I do may help because aid agencies are very interested in what’s going on in other countries. For example, Australia is a huge donor to Vietnam and Indonesia. You never really know who your stories are reaching and what is happening as a result. I’m always hopeful that something good will come out of what I’m doing.



McGill Fellow Matthew Grayson

“I won’t say I’m the only one who could have told it, but I was the only one clearly who was interested in telling it.”

– Harriet Washington

Participants

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Harriet A. Washington, Visiting Scholar at DePaul University College of Law; author, Medical Apartheid

Marlee Waxelbaum, McGill Fellow, Senior, Newspapers

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