

McGill

SYMPOSIUM ON JOURNALISTIC COURAGE



Wednesday, November 4, 2009

Grady  College
THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

The McGill program is funded by the McGill Lecture Endowment.
Contributors include Gannett Foundation.

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SYMPOSIUM ON JOURNALISTIC COURAGE

Excerpts from four group discussions:

- The long battle: Training journalists in conflict zones
- The publisher's role in an uncertain time
- Advancing journalism's watchdog role
- When everything changed:
The photojournalism of W.A. Bridges, Jr.

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

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Welcome



John F. Greenman

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

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

The McGill Symposium, now in its third year, is an outgrowth of the McGill Lecture.

For 30 years, the McGill Lecture has brought significant figures in journalism to the University of Georgia to help us honor Ralph McGill's courage as an editor.

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

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

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

Topics will include:

"The long battle: Training journalists in conflict zones"

"The publisher's role in an uncertain time"

"Advancing journalism's watchdog role"

"When everything changed: The photojournalism of W.A. Bridges, Jr."

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



The McGill Symposium assembled

The long battle: Training journalists in conflict zones

McGill Visiting Journalist

Lisa Schnellinger, journalist and media trainer in Iraq, Afghanistan and 17 other countries

Moderator

Lee Becker, professor, University of Georgia

Lisa Schnellinger knows firsthand how transformative journalism can be – especially in a country that is developing the principles of democracy.

Schnellinger, who has taught citizens in China, the Pacific Ocean region, Afghanistan and Iraq under the Knight International Press Fellowship Program, said she sees true journalistic courage in those who are taking on the practice in their countries for the first time.

“Thinking about courage means thinking about fear,” she said. “Human beings have the right to speak, and everything else comes from that ... You can’t have an operating democracy without information.”

The exemplary image of journalistic courage to her is a man who worked from sunrise to sunset, practicing his typing skills in the office and bringing her copy after copy to edit.

“When I think about courage, I think about him,” she said. “It’s not even the courage to face death but your own ignorance, fighting the daily grind.”

By practicing their craft within the community, local journalists can build trust with sources, create a working relationship with government officials and produce stories with more context than those of foreign reporters.



*Moderator Lee Becker and McGill
Visiting Journalist Lisa Schnellinger*

“You just have to explore what’s unfamiliar. Why be a journalist if you’re not curious and don’t want to be uncomfortable?”

–Lisa Schnellinger



McGill Fellows

"Many times there's a distorted picture that Americans are getting," she said. "When I worked at the *China Daily News*, I had different access and different pictures. I'd rather hear what the Chinese people think."

Schnellinger said the same principle applies at a community newspaper back in the United States. When she worked at the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and would often see a different world when she took the bus or walked to work.

"Their lives weren't engaged with other people. My colleagues literally didn't see the things I did," she said. "You just have to explore what's unfamiliar. Why be a journalist if you're not curious and don't want to be uncomfortable?"

Schnellinger learned how to embrace the unfamiliar by diving into a new culture and figuring out how to explain journalism in their terms. She initially works to establish basic infrastructure and then figures out what journalistic concepts translate – even the words themselves. With an established 10 international standards of journalism, such as timeliness and an interesting story, she teaches them how to approach their new roles.

"Human beings have the right to speak, and everything else comes from that... You can't have an operating democracy without information."

–Lisa Schnellinger

"We learned early that we had to first make sure they understood how radical democracy was and how it inverted the power structure," she said. "Their job was to help invert it, and once they got that, there was no stopping them. The standards come from thinking about the audience, not the source."

Schnellinger and others established a news agency that produces stories in all areas – print, radio, online – for both local and international outlets, but all content is by local journalists. She teaches a concept and model, and the group must apply it immediately and produce a story that meets international standards of journalism.

"Then there are cultural barriers," she said. "Female journalists can't just jump in a taxi by themselves ... and everyone at first had a hard time questioning authority figures and religious figures. You have to learn how to really take someone to task."

Legal protection was one of the hardest to explain to the budding journalists, especially in a country such as Iraq in which some watchdog journalists could be punished. Schnellinger explained to the staff that if they did their jobs correctly, over time citizens and politicians would understand the service they provide and support them. In some countries, part of their job is to help educate the politicians

themselves about how to do their jobs in a democracy, Schnellinger said. She's most impressed and touched by how the growing journalists stick to the task, no matter how difficult it is.

"They've lived in war all their lives ... they aren't as afraid of death as we are. You just can't be so scared to die."

The publisher's role in an uncertain time

McGill Visiting Journalists

Sara Borton, publisher, *The Island Packet*,
Hilton Head Island, SC

Valerie Canepa, publisher, *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, Columbus, GA

George McCanless, publisher, *Macon Telegraph*, Macon, GA

Moderator

Conrad Fink, professor, University of Georgia

In American journalism – where low profits are being questioned, ad revenue is down and many people are crying the “death of the newspaper” – courage stems from the publishers and top editors to bolster the morale of the newsroom and make decisions about what is in store for the future.

Sara Borton, president and publisher of the *Island Packet* in Hilton Head, SC; George McCanless, publisher of *The Macon Telegraph* in Macon, Ga.; and Valerie Canepa, president and publisher of the *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer* in Columbus, Ga., have differing ideas about financial solutions for the future but are all hopeful about the opportunities that will open up for journalists.



McGill Visiting Journalists Sara Borton, and
George McCanless with Moderator Conrad Fink

Where the business is going

Sara: It's stable but in transition, with a cyclical change in the economic downturn and a secular change with the new platform of the Internet. The challenge is three-fold: new product development, a new channel of distribution and a digital solution. The downward spiral of newspapers is not happening. Consumer patterns are changing with a 24/7 news operation, and we have a brand name to leverage as newspapers. We've developed trust and loyalty that no other media has, and if we're smart, we can move that audience online with us.

George: There are two great myths: newspapers are dead and nobody reads them. Every sector of the economy has seen a 30 to 40 percent decrease. Yes, we've had to cut costs and layoff journalists, but that doesn't equate with everyone deciding we're not relevant. Between print and macon.com, we reach 71 percent of the market in households – Kroger, Publix, Delta, even Bank of America, doesn't get that. We've made budget three months in a row and car dealers are starting to spend again. Some advertisers are coming back who haven't sold with us in a year. People are voting with their pocketbooks. And with the Internet – no new media ever put another out of business. It just splits up the pie more, and we're still eating.

Valerie: On the newsroom side, it's a great misconception that we're barely hanging on. We're lean but not weak. What has been cut are the auxiliary news gatherers, columnists and cartoonists. No paper has lost investigative reporters; we're hanging on to them. We do have large decisions in the next nine months about digital versus print, free versus paid online.

How the Internet changes reporting

Sara: It makes you write good leads. People want snippets in a hurry, and we're competing for their time. We have to write shorter but concise stories. Many times people read the lead and sometimes move on, but not always. People will come if the story is out, and the community comes to us because they trust us.

How the Internet changes writing

Valerie: Five years ago, we'd spin the print story forward because we realized we were scooped by TV and online, but now we break stories online all day. Web traffic for us is up 98 percent over last year because people want to know what's going on, and it's changed the way we report timely stories. In terms of analysis, we try not to say "this is what happened yesterday" but advance it to explain what could happen later in the year.

How the Internet changes advertising

Valerie: We're looking at behavioral targeting as a different online advertising model. Say you're looking at a site for a Lexus, then the ads identify you as a Lexus shopper, and those type of ads will come up on our website.

George: We've tried several different kinds – the pop under ads, some of the peel aways.

Sara: We've tried front page ads and pop unders. We're also trying focus groups so we can see what bugs people.

Past vs. future profits

George: We'll absolutely have to adjust to a different level instead of climbing back to where we were. I use the

analogy that the economic recession is like when a forest burns – things grow back again. No one expects to go back to the same levels.

Sara: We have to invest in ourselves like never before. Newspapers were old dinosaurs, and our expectations of margins were too high.

The local focus

George: The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* were some of the least profitable newspapers in history, and it took *USA Today* 10 years to get

somewhere. Small papers have the strongest markets, the smaller the stronger.

Valerie: Local newspapers have never done national and international news well – even the metro papers fill space with wire copy. We've stopped carrying as much because readers use the TV or *New York Times* for that kind of news. With the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* circulation gone from the area, we do talk about what to do to fill state and regional news.



McGill Visiting Journalist
Valerie Canepa

Online comments

Sara: You just have to be responsible about how you work online and not get into the gray areas. We all blog and comment about much more than we ever could. Reporters can comment back online and talk about why and how they covered a story, and this gives depth and transparency. On our website, readers can mark objectionable comments, and we can take off inappropriate ones.

Valerie: We have user registration on our site and send e-mails back to the person if they post inappropriate comments. We've blocked a few, but we don't monitor or edit the comments. We do have a daily sound off feature in the print edition, but we've tightened the guidelines – no personal attacks. Those are just demoralizing to the staff.

George: We don't accept legal responsibility for what's there, but you can't edit or change them. For some stories, we just don't allow commenting. Where you draw the line between print and online is you explain what is put into print is held to a certain standard. Letters in print are edited, but the Internet is completely different. This stuff is online whether we like it or not.



McGill Visiting Journalist Sara Borton
and Moderator Conrad Fink

**"There are two great myths:
newspapers are dead and
nobody reads them."**

–George McCanless

Looking for the money

Valerie: I want to raise the cost of the newspaper. I want to charge.

Sara: I just want the audience, even if it's only online. We can't change your reading habits, but I want to be your source.

George: We're trying to figure out how to charge for the Web because you can't put this information out for free. When Congress debated if it should help newspapers, a Sacred Heart College poll revealed 60 percent of people said they don't read papers because they get news online. That's like saying you don't care about helping farmers because you go to the grocery store. We are thinking of a membership idea – if you buy a print subscription, you get the Web for free.

Keeping personality and readers

Valerie: Our columnists were hired when times were good and we had money to spend. Some just weren't essential. We haven't cut national or syndicated columns, and they do it better than we do. We're also creating and selling a cookbook for the community.

George: For too long, we assumed if we built it, they would come. We've been slack in our marketing. I make it a point to tell the community – groups such as Kiwanis and Rotary – why they should care about our survival. They understand and know the value we bring to the community. We have to convince our readers why we're worth it.

Advancing journalism's watchdog role

McGill Visiting Journalist

Martin Kaiser, executive editor, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Milwaukee, WI

Moderator

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

For Martin Kaiser – editor of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, president of the Association of News Editors and *Editor & Publisher's* editor of the year – the watchdog role of journalism is the most important aspect of the newsroom to keep intact during tough economic times.

"The economy has helped us to focus on what's important," he said. "If I knew how to solve it, I'd jump on a plane and copy it. But we had to go back and talk about what's important – holding public officials accountable and having an impact in journalism."

Kaiser led talks in his newsroom about which stories were relevant to cover, who had the expertise to cover them and how to produce effective investigative stories by using online timelines, photo galleries and videos.

"I think the Internet will help us with credibility, actually, because you can link to documents and other reports. Here's where I got the fact, the interview, the resource," he said. "With our projects, we make it a newsroom effort around the enterprise."

In 2008, the newsroom produced "Wasted in Wisconsin," a 72-day series on the culture of alcohol in the state, which featured a person killed by a drunk driver in each of the 72 counties.

"We started off with a question: What is this culture about?" he said. "Then according to reporting expertise, we looked at where the culture came from, why legislation is the way it is, what the industry in Wisconsin is and how it's affecting the one major brewery left. With database reporting, 29 members of our staff worked on it, and it was a rallying point for them."

After the series, legislators evaluated the laws and decided to raise taxes to enforce them. The beer tax hadn't increased in 10 years thanks to powerful lobbying groups. Though the staff caught criticism for the series and a few bars pulled advertising, the overwhelming positive response made it worth it, Kaiser said.

"You just have to explain and be transparent," he said.

"Here's the story and the impact. We're not telling you to not go out and do it, which is why we narrowed the idea from drinking alcohol to drunk driving. Not many people can be for drunk driving. We felt it was a powerful issue, and when we started the series, I explained it on the front page."

With tough economic times, sustaining good reporting is vital. Kaiser does this by keeping morale up in the newsroom and trying new things.



*McGill Visiting Journalist Martin Kaiser
and Moderator Valerie Boyd*

"Good reporters know how to find good stories. You got into the business to tell good stories and you only live once – let's have some fun doing it," he said. "Investigative work has an impact and gets a response. You build a brand and the readers expect it ... what I love that keeps me going is the energy of the staff."

**"I think the Internet will help
us with credibility, actually,
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documents and other reports."**

—Martin Kaiser

Innovation and energy are the future, he said. With large profit margins and one deadline per day, newspapers became lazy.

"When there were two to three papers in every city, they published around the clock and you were always near an editor. The tops of stories were battled over, and you had to grab a reader or they were gone to the next publication," he said. "Papers in the 1950s looked like Web pages with little stories on the front. In the 1960s they changed because TV came along and papers became more narrative and reactive in the morning."

With yet another shift in technology, the industry must change to tell the story even better. This includes aspects of video, audio and documents to accompany stories but also reports unto themselves – databases of campaign contributions, interactive maps and restaurant inspections. And his reporters are taking it up without question.

"We can't help but be concerned about the future and finances. Some people choose to leave and do other things, but you know the people there really want to be there," he said. "You'll never know what'll come out on the other end, and it's tremendous. We have an impact on the community, and you have to have a sense of place and have fun."

When everything changed: The photojournalism of W.A. Bridges, Jr.

McGill Visiting Journalist

W.A. Bridges, Jr., staff photographer, *Atlanta Journal Constitution*,
Atlanta, GA

Moderator

Mark E. Johnson, lecturer, University of Georgia

When it comes to good moments, W.A. Bridges, Jr. knows how to capture them.

Bridges, a photojournalist for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* for 28 years, has photographed big names such as Muhammad Ali, Herschel Walker, R.E.M., Sylvester Stallone, Michael Jordan and Nelson Mandela. With travels to South Africa and Mali and his experience as one of the first African American staffers at the *AJC*, he has displayed tremendous courage in carrying out day-to-day assignments.

"You have to keep an open mind and internally check your temperature as you go into tense events," he said, referring particularly to the apartheid in South Africa. "I was going places other blacks couldn't go, and it just felt wrong. There was a totally different slant of prejudice, and you have to see the different facets and people."

Bridges still vividly remembers the chaos that erupted in 1992 during the Rodney King riots in downtown Atlanta. He was driving back from an assignment and was tired but saw groups of people running down Decatur Street and jumped out of the car to take photographs.



Moderator Mark E. Johnson and McGill
Visiting Journalist W.A. Bridges, Jr.

"Pretty pictures are nice, but
do they tell a story? If not,
you didn't do your job."

—W.A. Bridges, Jr.

"I was able to be on both sides of the street," he said. "It was weird. One minute I was with the cops, and one minute I was with the kids. White journalists had a problem getting this access. It was an interesting kind of situation, and it seemed like some people felt like they were back in the '60s or something and just started attacking each other."

Though he was in the middle of physical violence, Bridges said he was never scared.

"There's just adrenaline," he said. "It was real life stuff, and I wanted to get it. I got it."

But when a group of men started beating another, he dropped the line between journalist and human being and put down his camera to help others stop the fight.

"At that point, there was no thought. It was a reflex," he said. "They were killing the guy. In the long run, I'd rather stick with him as a human being than let that follow me beyond my career."

The balance between print and visual journalist is also tough to find, he said.

"There's the wave of reporters that can shoot and shooters that can write. It's important to learn ... but it's difficult to go in and get the defining picture and write at the same time," he said. "You could miss the moment."

And finding that moment is what photography is all about to Bridges.

"You have to be able to think about the story you're doing. Pretty pictures are nice, but do they tell a story?" he said. "If not, you didn't do your job. You have to be able to understand what the story is and put it in the place of who is looking at the paper so they understand it, too."



McGill Visiting Journalist W.A. Bridges, Jr.

But the economy has hit hard for Bridges – and many photojournalists – in terms of opportunities.

"In the journalism heyday, within a day you could be sent across the globe. I loved that time," he said. "I think we capitulated to the Internet too quickly. Photos are the most unique aspects of the paper still. The Internet doesn't play to that enough."

Now that Bridges works on his own projects, he's reflecting on previous work and thinking about visiting South Africa again.

"When I go back, it's now for personal reasons. It's interesting to see the post-apartheid world existing today, and a fringe is still there. It's confusing and left an ugly scar," he said. "I have a book coming out next year, and it'll talk about my points of time there the past 20 years – seeing the change now."

Participants

Sara Borton, McGill Visiting Journalist, publisher,
The Island Packet, Hilton Head Island, SC

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

W.A. Bridges, Jr., McGill Visiting Journalist, staff
photographer, *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, Atlanta, GA

Valerie Canepa, McGill Visiting Journalist, publisher,
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Hayley Peterson, McGill Fellow, Senior, Newspapers

Claire Rock, McGill Fellow, Senior, Magazines

Lisa Schnellinger, McGill Visiting Journalist,
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