

McGill

SYMPOSIUM ON JOURNALISTIC COURAGE



Wednesday, October 20, 2010

Grady  College
THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

The McGill program is funded by the McGill Lecture Endowment. Contributors include Gannett Foundation and the Knight Chair in Health and Medical Journalism.

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SYMPOSIUM ON JOURNALISTIC COURAGE

Excerpts from four group discussions:

- Covering the Mexican drug war:
Murder, kidnapping, intimidation and fear
- When war comes home: Covering the impact of war on veterans and their communities
- Photojournalists in a storm: A look back at Katrina coverage
- Non-profit investigative reporting to the rescue?

Note: This report was written by Mimi Ensley. 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, professor, 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 fourth year, is an outgrowth of the McGill Lecture.

For 32 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 six McGill Visiting Journalists for a six-hour discussion.

Topics will include:

“Covering the Mexican drug war: Murder, kidnapping, intimidation and fear”

“When war comes home: Covering the impact of war on veterans and their communities”

“Photojournalists in a storm: A look back at Katrina coverage”

“Non-profit investigative reporting to the rescue?”

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

Covering the Mexican drug war: Murder, kidnapping, intimidation and fear

McGill Visiting Journalist

Javier Garza, editorial director, *El Siglo de Torreón*,
Torreón, Mexico

Moderator

Lee B. Becker, professor, University of Georgia

For Javier Garza, continuing to report on the violence surrounding the drug wars in his home country wasn't even a question.

It was something that just had to be done.

For Garza, who serves as editorial director of *El Siglo de Torreón* in Torreón, Mexico, courage isn't remarkable or extraordinary. It's just part of a journalist's day-to-day responsibilities.

"I never thought of it as something that should be distinguished," Garza said. "I think in journalism, you have to be there in the good times and bad times. Good times became bad times over night, and there was just no question there. We had to keep going."

Garza and the reporters he oversees have met threats and manipulation from the warring gangs terrorizing Mexico in a bloody turf war. The Zetas and the Sinaloas – two of the fighting cartels – both threaten and bully the media, each trying to get a favorable spin on the story.

"They have a really twisted world view," Garza said. "And they're really worried about their public relations, their PR, their public image. They resort to intimidation, to fear, to murder, to drive home the point that they're the good guys – which is the most incomprehensible thing."

Though Garza decided the story had to be covered – despite media kidnappings, despite the 64 reporters killed since 2006, despite the constant threats of violence – the newspaper did have to take some precautions.



McGill Visiting Journalist Javier Garza
and Moderator Lee Becker

"I think in journalism, you have to be there in the good times and bad times. Good times became bad times over night, and there was just no question there. We had to keep going."

–Javier Garza

Coverage couldn't go away completely, but it could be muted.

"There was no point in risking a reporter's life over publishing a story," Garza said.

The paper established rules and guidelines for its crime coverage. Journalists weren't getting help from the government, so they took matters of protection into their own hands.

They compiled a rules list of how to report crime stories, independently pledging to take such measures as rotating the crime beat regularly, not appending bylines to crime stories and burying violent drug stories that may have ulterior motives deep in the inside pages of the paper.

Instead of splashing their front pages with the blood of the drug wars, they focus on the stories of the innocent victims. Instead of rushing to the press to scoop their competition, they take time to weigh the importance of the story. They talk it out amongst the editors and senior administrators. They collaborate.

However, it's hard to follow hard and fast rules all the time. The line is often fuzzy. Decisions have to be made quickly.

In a question to Garza, McGill Fellow Katie Barlow noted the difficulty of drawing this line: "There comes a point in time when you realize that the publications, a lot of them, weren't worth the individual life of a reporter. But then you said there are some times you can't ignore it, and it has to be on the front page...Where is that line and how do you determine that line in that situation? It's an impossible question to answer, but how do you do it?"

Garza said he trusts his reporters on the ground and their feelings of safety.

"If they have the slightest doubt...then we don't publish," he said.

And he said he always errs on the side of safety. He might tone down coverage until there's a clearer picture. He might bury a story instead of playing it on the front page.

"I think it has affected our journalistic integrity in that it has forced us to do things that we don't want to do and that we wouldn't be doing in normal times,"

—Javier Garza

McGill Fellow Elissa Ewald wondered how Garza and the Mexican media could retain journalistic integrity in this situation.

"I think it has affected our journalistic integrity in that it has forced us to do things that we

don't want to do and that we wouldn't be doing in normal times," Garza said.

And the public has noticed the subdued coverage, the lack of investigations, the almost-scared tone of the paper.

"The public is convinced that we are censoring ourselves," Garza said. "So there's been a rise to try to fill that vacuum."

There has been a movement to cover the turf wars through social media in order to make up for the stories the traditional outlets cannot report.

However, these reports are often exaggerated or biased. They don't go through the traditional filters of multiple editors and ethical codes.

Garza said this has contributed to an increase in terror.

Nevertheless, Garza spoke of a public understanding of the newspapers' actions. He mentioned an appreciation of the little coverage the crime reporters are able to safely provide.

"You can still talk about the wave of violence, the wave of crime, and not talk about individual incidents," he said.

And they've never given up. They've never completely shut down.

"[The crime reporter] knows what he's gotten into, and he doesn't make a big deal about it," Garza said. "We're basically resigned to the fact that if they're going to come after you, they're going to come after you."

When war comes home: Covering the impact of war on veterans and their communities

McGill Visiting Journalists

Kayla Williams, Truman National Security Fellow,
Washington, DC

Aaron Glantz, reporter, *The Bay Citizen*,
San Francisco, CA

Moderator

Patricia Thomas, professor, University of Georgia

Bay Citizen reporter Aaron Glantz covers war like no other war correspondent.

He doesn't crouch in the bush, notebook in hand, as bullets whiz past his ears. He doesn't parachute from war-torn country to war-torn country, chasing a story of blood and violence. He doesn't file copy about combat strategies or air raids.

He covers the war when it comes home.

Though he was inside Iraq from 2003 to 2005, Glantz has since taken on the crusade of reporting on veteran's issues, most recently veteran's suicides.

And he understands the effect his true-to-life reports can have on a nation that often doesn't understand or care to understand the specific problems of those returning from war.

He uses his story-telling style to draw readers into the issues he sees as important – issues the government may have largely ignored.

"I think that there's kind of a don't look, don't find attitude that the government has," Glantz said. "Because of the additional public scrutiny, they have begun to respond to that...but they're not doing a good job."

So where does the journalist come in?

"In all of your stories it's clear that you're writing to help these people," said McGill Fellow Carey O'Neil. "So what do you think the role of the journalist is? Should we be out looking for those problems that need to be solved?"



McGill Visiting Journalists Kayla Williams and Aaron Glantz

"Journalists want so badly to not appear biased that they will always tell both sides of the story. Sometimes, it's OK to admit that the other side is not necessarily a reputable source."

—Kayla Williams



McGill Fellows Kelundra Smith and
Carey O'Neil

And Glantz had the answer.

"I think that we should write about what's happening," he said. "Your role as a journalist is to expose what has happened."

Kayla Williams, former sergeant and army linguist, comes from the other side of the issue.

She's an advocate for veterans' issues, and though exposing the societal problems related to veterans is important for her, it's also just as important that journalists remember they are covering real people with real concerns.

"Journalists want so badly to not appear biased that they will always tell both sides of the story," Williams said. "Sometimes, it's OK to admit that the other side is not necessarily a reputable source."

Williams urged journalists to think of the veterans they may deal with in a story, not as mere examples of a societal problem, but as live – and often volatile – personalities.

She asked journalists to consider whether they were adding to the stereotypes by emphasizing them. She asked them to consider the truth behind what a source says and act discerningly. She asked them to put their statistics and facts in perspective, pushing their stories beyond the whos, whats and whens to get at a historical and meaningful point of view.

"Your role as a journalist is to
expose what has happened."

–Aaron Glantz

Glantz agreed, but also recognized the power a specific person's story can have in making tangible changes in society.

"If you point out a severe flaw in the system, and spotlight the case of a particular person, people will often step forward to assist that person," Glantz said. "But that's not the primary reason to write that story."

His stories zoom in on a particular veteran – James Eggemeyer, a veteran who ended up homeless and living out of his truck, Armin Sahrai, an air force vet who died of an overdose of pain medication, Reuben Paul Santos, who was on a path of descent from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and eventually committed suicide – and then use those stories to speak about the larger issue and incite change.

And that's what both voices – the advocate and the journalist – seemed to want: change.

"By bringing it to the attention of Congress it may bring more resources into these areas," Williams said.

Glantz agreed.

"Even though you're not writing the story to make something happen," he said, "you kind of want to see some kind of hit."

Photojournalists in a storm: A look back at Katrina coverage

McGill Visiting Journalist

Eric Gay, staff photographer, Associated Press,
San Antonio, TX

Moderator

Mark E. Johnson, lecturer, University of Georgia

Associated Press photographer Eric Gay landed in New Orleans just a day before Hurricane Katrina hit.

For the next six days, he watched the major city crumble in the wake of one of the greatest natural disasters of our time.

He saw bodies float down flooded streets, hungry and confused citizens who had lost everything they had ever known and city officials not sure where to turn next.

But Gay focused on the stories. Everyone had a story.

"There's so much, you tend to start taking out your wide lens," Gay said. "But shoot the details, shoot the faces, because that's what really matters – the people."

Gay said he never knew what to expect when he went out day after day. Luckily, he had a hotel room in the French Quarter, but supplies were running low and electricity was hard to come by. People were raiding stores. They were roaming the streets. They didn't know where to turn.

"You don't expect this to happen in America," Gay said. "Nobody did."

Gay bathed every night with a bottle of water. He couldn't lock his electric hotel room door, so he left at daybreak and came back at dark. He wished he had packed more socks.

"You have to weigh the risks," he said. "A lot of times you get caught up in telling the story and getting the picture, and sometimes you have to think about yourself."



McGill Visiting Journalist Eric Gay

"You don't expect this to happen in America. Nobody did."

–Eric Gay



McGill Visiting Journalist Eric Gay

"But shoot the details, shoot the faces, because that's what really matters – the people."

–Eric Gay

As he weighed the chaos around him, he knew he had a job to do. He knew he had to stay.

But did he ever question that decision? As moderator Mark Johnson asked, "So if your phone rings, and you know there's something coming, do you hesitate?"

Gay's answer was a clear "No."

"There's a fine line between your personal safety and telling the story," he said. "And I like telling the story."

But getting that story in the days following Katrina wasn't easy – physically or emotionally.

Stranded residents often asked Gay and his writer colleague for rides out of the city, but Gay had to decline. He had to stay and do his job.

And his job involved not just readers in New Orleans or in one particular community.

As Johnson noted, "Your role with the Associated Press is different than that of the New Orleans newspaper...because the audience that you're speaking to is much broader. Who were you trying to tell that story for?"

Gay said a hurricane typically begins as a regional story, but Katrina quickly escalated into something bigger. Soon, the world was watching and wondering when help would arrive. All Gay could do was continue to tell the story.

"The best way that we really could help people was to tell their story," he said. "By telling their story, you're telling the story of hundreds of thousands of people there."

One man he met asked Gay to keep his camera as he evacuated the city. Gay eventually found the man's daughter and returned the bag. Another older man ran out of oxygen in the ninth ward and died. Bodies laid abandoned in the street medians.

"You want to take the pictures because this story has to be told," Gay said, "But you don't want to start taking pictures and getting in their faces."

But he continued with his coverage. He focused on the survivors. He focused on the rescuers. He focused on the stories of humanity that are only revealed when people are pushed to their limits.

Because the story is important.

"You've got to ask the right questions, the hard questions," Gay said. "And you have to be truthful and honest with your work."

Non-profit investigative reporting to the rescue?

McGill Visiting Journalist

Paul Steiger, editor in chief, *ProPublica*, New York, NY

Hank Klibanoff, project managing director, The Civil Rights Cold Cases Project, Atlanta, GA

Moderator

Conrad Fink, professor, University of Georgia

Moderator Conrad Fink began his session on the future of non-profit journalism by asking for a look back.

"What is the kind of journalism that we're coming from?" he asked panelists Hank Klibanoff and Paul Steiger. "Why is it that the issue of non-profit journalism even arises? What is wrong with the traditional model, and what might the future hold?"

When Klibanoff was reporting, times were very different for journalism than they are today.

"It was the good old days," Klibanoff, former managing editor of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, said. "There was plenty of money to do anything we wanted in journalism, to think big, to spend – wisely we hoped – but to spend certainly sometimes seemingly without limits."

But that all changed.

Now, with advertising revenue down for print media and the uncharted territory of Web-based journalism ahead, the industry is "groping in the dark," for a solution, Klibanoff said.

Paul Steiger – CEO and editor in chief of *ProPublica* – thinks he's come across a solution: non-profit investigative reporting.

"There is, I think, in this kind of new ecosystem that's going to develop, an important role for non-profit structures," Steiger said. "Particularly for things like investigative reporting."



McGill Visiting Journalist Paul Steiger and Hank Klibanoff and Moderator Conrad Fink

"There is, I think, in this kind of new ecosystem that's going to develop, an important role for non-profit structures. Particularly for things like investigative reporting."

–Paul Steiger

He said in his time as managing editor of the *Wall Street Journal* from 1991 to 2007, he would have a news budget of \$100 million, and the freedom to assign 30 or 40 investigative stories that may take weeks or months to complete and cost the newspaper tens of thousands of dollars.

"But I could do this because I had thousands of other stories where it would take a reporter an hour and a half," he said.

That's no longer the case.

"They have to adjust their product and staff size and ambitions to a much lower stream of advertising revenue," Steiger said. "It's doable, but it's not easy."

Gone are the "lush" days of spending in the media. Media outlets have had to move on.

"This model that we're seeing in the non-profit world is a godsend, it really is," Klibanoff said. "I hope that it's a model that we see replicated over and over again."

But Klibanoff still has a question.

"At some point will the largesse, will the idea of just giving money away turn to a desire to make money?" he asked.

And McGill fellow Daniel Burnett wasn't sure about the non-profit model either.

"Couldn't that lead to some conflicts of interest?" he asked.

Even Steiger doesn't think non-profits can be the entire solution. The day-to-day journalism still must be done on a for-profit model, he said.

"A lot of these news organizations will find a way – with lower revenues – to make a profit by doing a range of news activities, including in many but not all instances, a certain amount of watchdog journalism, and doing it through the for-profit model," he said. "But what that envisions is a substantially lower amount of...substantial watchdog journalism."



McGill Visiting Journalist
Hank Klibanoff

He said it is difficult to get philanthropists to give money to broad based journalism. They prefer to fund journalism that is specifically and decidedly completed for the public good.

For example, *ProPublica* recently released a report on medical doctors and the revenue they get from drug companies. The journalists there hope the investigation will force doctors to be more aware, transparent and careful with how they deal with drug companies.

And though watchdog journalism isn't all newspapers accomplish – there is still a need for daily crime stories, local government coverage and interesting features – it is a large part of the journalistic tradition.

Now, news organizations just have to find the funding for it.

"For the 40 years of my newspaper career, there was no need for significant philanthropic funding of investigative reporting," Steiger said. "Now, if we're going to have it, to have anything like we've had in the past, the philanthropists are going to have to decide that this kind of journalism that supports a democracy is just as good an outlet for their philanthropy as museums, ballet companies and orchestras."

"This model that we're seeing in the non-profit world is a godsend, it really is. I hope that it's a model that we see replicated over and over again."

–Hank Klibanoff

Participants

Katie Barlow, McGill Fellow, senior, Broadcast News

Lee B. Becker, professor, University of Georgia

Daniel Burnett, McGill Fellow, senior, Newspapers

Sonya Collins, McGill Fellow, graduate student, Journalism

Elissa Ewald, McGill Fellow, senior, Magazines

Michael Fitzpatrick, McGill Fellow, senior, Newspapers

Conrad Fink, professor, University of Georgia

Javier Garza, McGill Visiting Journalist, editorial director, *El Siglo de Torreón*, Torreón, Mexico

Eric Gay, McGill Visiting Journalist, staff photographer, Associated Press, San Antonio, TX

Anita George, McGill Fellow, senior, Magazines

Aaron Glantz, McGill Visiting Journalist, reporter, *The Bay Citizen*, San Francisco, CA

John F. Greenman, professor, University of Georgia

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