

## 2008 International Symposium on Online Journalism

### Day 2, Wrap-up Discussion Session

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#### **Symposium Chair:**

**Rosental Calmon Alves**, Professor, Knight Chair in Journalism and UNESCO Chair in Communication, School of Journalism, University of Texas at Austin

#### **Closing Session Speaker:**

**Ed Wasserman**: Professor, Washington and Lee University, and Knight Chair in Journalism

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**Rosental Calmon Aves**: So my surprise is that I'm inviting my esteemed colleague and friend, Ed Wasserman, from the Washington-Lee University. He is a Knight Chair like me. His expertise is on the field of journalistic ethics. And we're going to have just a very informal wrap-up session here just to... You know, I'm going to ask him, what were the main points that he -- that he thought were the most important and his final observations of this event. And you can use this mike here.

**Ed Wasserman**: Thank you, Rosental. Is this loud enough? Yeah? Surprise to me too, but it's a pleasure. [audience laughter] You've been -- you've been very patient, and I will not tax your patience further. We have been... I'm sort of the clean-up hitter here, as we say in baseball. And you've spent a lot [of time] thinking about facts. My field is not facts. My field is values. And so I want to spend a little bit of time talking about values. And I'm talking, I'm referring mainly to the presentations yesterday. One of the things that I found very gratifying about the presentations today is that the academics seem to be far more respectful of the values that I think constitute journalism than the businesspeople were. I'm a little afraid that the people who are pioneering the actual moves onto the internet are a little bit heedless of some of the traditions that they are supposed to be in the business of bearing forth as we make this migration onto the internet, but I'll come back to that.

So in any event, I'm going to talk a little bit about values. And my passion, if you like, is exploring how and whether the values that I think constitute the practice of journalism will survive the migration to the web. Now in fact, the presentations we did here yesterday were less based upon fact and more based upon speculations. And although the title of the conference is really a symposium on online journalism, we weren't really talking about the journalism, the practice of journalism, we were talking about the business of

## 2008 International Symposium on Online Journalism

news. So I'm going to offer a few disrespectful observations about the business discussion.

The first is that the leaders of the news business have generally historically been pretty consistently wrong about most of the major pronouncements they've made at least in my time as a journalist. I've got about 30 years as a journalist before I took a wrong turn like Rosental and ended up as an academic. They were wrong that radio would destroy newspapers. They were wrong that TV would destroy movies. Newspaper reader -- leaders, rather, have been wrong about the decline of their own industry: about the rate of decline, the reasons for the decline. They missed the rise of the internet pretty thoroughly. And they were asleep when their principle revenue sources disappeared. So first point is that these assurances in this kind of consistent theme that we're hearing, which I'll return to in a moment, having to do with verticality and the disaggregation and fragmentation of the market, is the current wisdom, and I think we should approach it with great skepticism. Could be right every now and then. Even a stopped clock is right twice a day.

Anyway, we'll leave aside the question of what would be produced under this new regime can properly be called journalism at all. But I would suggest to you that there is no reason to think that this verticality will work. You recall what I'm talking about now. It really was the keynote address. It's the direction that his company is going, the direction that Gannet is going. It's the direction that a number of major journalism companies or news organization in this country are going. There's no real reason to think it will work. It might work. It might not.

It's based on an untried model. It's based on the development of unknown markets and non-existent advertising sources. My own suspicion is that vertical micro-markets may turn out to be highly competitive, especially because in this country television broadcasters are about to be flooded with hundreds of news channels with nothing to do on [them] and no content for [them]. And they are *all* going to go hyper-local. They are *all* going to go after these same kinds of content areas. So it could get very crowded. And there's a famous expression by a ball player in this country named Yogi Berra, who was known for his comical nonsense statements, and he said, he said about a restaurant, "Nobody goes there anymore. It's too crowded."

[Audience laughter.]

My third point is that media have always relied on business models that are slightly incoherent. Take consumer advertiser, advertising support. On a micro level it makes no sense, because *my* customers are going to pay to inform or entertain your audiences. So there's a kind of disconnect. Sometimes my customers happen to be your audience, but it doesn't necessarily have to work that way and oftentimes it does not. On the macro

## 2008 International Symposium on Online Journalism

level, advertising support rests on the notion, well, it asks, why should anybody suspect that the aggregate benefit that advertisers *believe* they derive can be monetized in such a way to assure the news and information that a community needs for its civic health?

Now, there are two completely different worlds that are supposed to be coming together: the advertisers who are paying the money, because their advertisers work and make them money, and that money creates a pool of resources that we then turn around and use to fund journalism. And somehow, the money they pay is supposed to work out to just the kind of resources the community needs to maintain its health. And of course, who knows? And oftentimes, that's not the case.

Anyway, the free internet. My fourth point here is the free internet is a leap—a great leap forward into further incoherence. It's not free, of course. It's unintelligible. There's a system of invisible supports and cross-subsidies from offline businesses in which content creators are rarely rewarded at all. That, unfortunately, is the environment to which traditional news organizations are migrating. And I'm not even talking about the problem of internet advertising, which is a deeply troubling model based upon surveillance. It's based upon secretly gathering information about your customers in order to offer advertisers more targeted opportunities to present them with things that seem to coincide with their interests.

And I noticed that there was kind of surreptitious, this sort of, we're going to get into social networking sites. The news organizations will have social networking sites. Then people are going to disclose and put online all kinds of information about what they like and what they don't like. I didn't hear anybody talk about what uses are to be made of that information. Who is that information going to be sold to? And whether the people who are providing this information are going to *know* that this information is going to be sold. Are they okay with that? There's a problem of privacy here. So the ad support... My point here is the advertising supported internet is not free. It is a hidden information exchange. You as a user will receive information exchanged for information about yourself that you are surrendering often unknowingly.

A final point about advertising. I don't whether you knew this, but the circulation revenue of the typical U.S. newspaper is actually sufficient to pay its editorial costs. So if you didn't have paper and ink, and if you didn't have advertising, and all you had was the 50 cents a day you get from your subscriber to pay, it would be enough to pay for your newsroom. Anyway, journalism has always relied on subsidy. From the first time there were journalists, you had patrons in political parties, you had patrons in the royal houses. You always had subsidy from somewhere outside of journalism. The difference now, listening to the presentations on citizen journalism, citizen

## 2008 International Symposium on Online Journalism

journalists, it's very interesting to ask yourself, where is that subsidy coming from at this point? And is that okay? And is that sustainable?

In any event, on to values. Values are what we care about. Values are when we consider what *should* happen as opposed to what we think is going to happen. Now, economic necessity is a powerful argument to get people to do things they don't think they should do. As long as I've been a journalist, (and I started around the time that Watergate happened), employers have been telling me that their business was collapsing. And of course, they are asking for certain kinds of work to be done that I probably wouldn't have done otherwise. They are asking for certain kinds of tailored journalism to be done to support certain kinds of initiatives that probably didn't represent your highest and best aspirations as a journalist. It didn't mean you were finding the most important publicly significant facts and making them public. It meant that you were providing content that was a comfortable environment for advertising to be displayed.

So, what does this have to do with values? What does this have to do with moral philosophy? Well, we end up backing into the belief that the rightness of action is determined -- the rightness of an action is determined by its consequences. That is to say that we don't really like doing this as professionals. Maybe we don't think it's what we ought to be doing. That's not why we went to journalism school. But we need to do it to keep the news organization alive, because we've got to pay the bills to keep the lights on and all the rest of it. And so we justify the action by its consequences. Now, that is what we study. We all studied it in school as the school of moral philosophy. It's called consequentialism. It's variant, utilitarianism, is the state religion in America.

Now there are many problems with it. How do we judge actions by their consequences when we don't know consequences? We can't see the future. We don't see around corners. Complex systems always yield an indefinite series of consequences, none of them knowable. Luckily, it's not our only choice. We have more... When we look at moral systems, we look at ethics.

Let me just back up, in case you are puzzled by this. A doctor who hastened his examination of the patient because he had to see more patients in order to preserve the flow of cash into the medical practice and as a result ended up prescribing -- misdiagnosing the patient, we would have no trouble describing that doctor as guilty of malpractice. He is violating professional norms. His duty to his patient is being violated, even though he had a really solid, good, economic justification for treating his patient -- for maltreating his patient.

Anyway, so consequentialism isn't our only choice when it comes to moral systems. You can determine your action. You can decide on it because you think it's virtuous. As the act of somebody who is fair and honest and

## 2008 International Symposium on Online Journalism

tempered and just, you can act in accordance with principles you think other people should follow. You can act in such a way to respect and defend the basic rights of others, to strengthen the bonds of trust and care, to act toward others as you would have them act toward you. Right? There are all kinds of ways that you can conceive of what your duty is, what your obligations consist of.

And it matters because journalism is really ultimately all about values. It's about helping to figure out what matters: what matters to you, what matters to people around you, to people you serve. It's about facilitating a process of clarifying civic purpose, exploring possibilities of justices and prosperity of community well being. It's a practice that is constituted not just by skills but by duties and obligations. And you have to ask if those obligations are being honored.

Now we have this internet. The internet is a vast and powerful complex of communicative potentials. It has unprecedented capacity to enfranchise previous silent populations, to provide topical information and commentary in compelling and powerful ways. And how it is used will express our values in most profound ways. Ever since journalism was joined to [inaudible] advertising in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, we've walked a careful line between its value as a means of drawing a crowd and its civic importance as a tool of self-government. The potential now, I think, is for that line to be erased. The unparalleled possibilities of joining the principles of journalism to the powers of the internet could be lost.

And I think that's what I found disturbing in the presentations [and] I find disturbing in the world that we are kind of entering into now. And that's all I've got.

[Audience applause.]

**Rosental Calmon Alves:** I think I could not have planned a better way of ending this.

**Ed Wasserman:** Spoiling the party, huh?

**Rosental Calmon Alves:** Well, no, I don't. I think it's very serious. I think the... You know, this symposium actually started with our keynote speaker talking about the role of journalism and democracy and the importance of the survival of journalism in this new environment; although, maybe you and our first keynote speaker come from different venues, but, you know, this has been the main issue for the beginning and for the end. And I salute this. I think it's, you know, what you gave us is very important, because it is clear from a symposium like that, that we are in a moment of deconstruction of journalism, deconstruction of journalism structures, systems of reducing journalism, etc. And you...

## 2008 International Symposium on Online Journalism

I was in Spain talking about that, and the person who talked after me, you know, the president of the university that I was talking at, said, you know, "Rosental is talking about deconstruction, not demolition." And I think Mario Tascón had the one graphic here talking about the deconstruction of newspaper.

Actually, one topic that was all over here is that we are really in the time—because of the dimension of what is going on—in a time of disassembling. Someone else today talked about the disassembly. We're taking pieces of what we created in the industrial era and we are reconstructing it for the digital era. We are... You know, it's very clear for me that we are in a process that I can only compare with the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg and with the beginning of the industrial revolution. You know, that is the whole -- the big picture of that. And it's very important that journalists who are the protagonists of this deconstruction don't forget the values. Don't forget the, you know, the principles and the basis and the roots of journalists and the role of journalism in a democratic society.

So I think, you know, I'm very pleased with the symposium. You are my heroes, because you are here after so many hours on this beautiful Saturday in Austin. I don't want to go long, but I want just to start thanking not only you, but a special thanks for my J321C class, which is Fundamentals of Multimedia Journalism. That these students...

[Audience applause.]

Yes. These students have done a tremendous job. I mean, I saw some of their work here. They have been doing online journalism while we were talking about online journalism, doing a real-time coverage of this symposium. Some of you have been interviewed by them. I think Robert Rich has done a tremendous work in the blog. I mean, the blog that he led with other students was kind of created in class. And he did minute-by-minute coverage of this -- of this symposium. Caroline did also a tremendous photo work. I mean, the photos here was almost minute-by-minute. Before the end of the panel, you know, the photos were already uploaded. I can't thank enough Amy Schmitz Weiss.