1999 – International Symposium on Online Journalism

Opening Session

Panelists:

Rosental Calmon Alves, Professor and Knight Chair in Journalism, University of Texas at Austin

Griffin Singer, Senior lecturer and Associate Chair, Department of Journalism, University of Texas at Austin

Martha Russell, Asst. Dean, Technology, College of Communication, University of Texas at Austin

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Rosental Calmon Alves: Good morning, we are going to start now, 15 minutes late. As a matter of fact, to keep my tradition as a Brazilian we threw this kind of 15-minute buffer in to be late.

I'm going to ask Dr. Martha Russell to welcome you in the name of the College, and then my colleague Griff Singer is going to welcome you in the name of the department. I'm going to speak a little bit and then we are going to start sharp at 9 a.m.

Martha Russell: I'm to say welcome and I really say it sincerely. The things you are going to be talking about today are very important to what we are doing here in the college and to what you are doing as professionals. This morning as I left the house I was leaving a bit earlier than usual, I've been out of town most of the week, and I backed up the driveway, I picked up "the news." It's sitting in the back seat of my car right now. I got to my office, turned on my computer and I read "my news." You can tell actually, quite a bit about me by knowing the way I have my online news preferences set. I'm reading the things that come across about distance education, about the interactive media industries, about Internet consumers, about communication technologies. I'm plugged in through that to the community that I work in, the community that I live in, the community of people who are thinking and doing things that stimulate me and challenge me.

There's a difference to me between "my news" and "the news." Immediate and interactive and international, people are wanting it that way, and figuring out to strike the balance between personalization and micro-market segmentation, how and when to do the type of profiling that's going to allow those kind of services to be delivered. It's quite an awesome set of new frontiers that we are crossing. Several months ago, a study done by Morgan Stanley revealed that about 40 percent of

people who were online said yes, probably within five years they expected to getting all of their news on the Internet. A recent study by Forrester that look at the volume and the revenues of online business to consumer business that is expected in the next five years are looking at $108 billion. That's a pretty big business. They are looking at business to business growing to $1.5 trillion, projecting that probably five percent of the revenues that are exchanged world wide will be exchanged online.

It's probably going to be a good bit of new frontiers that are covered in that and as we and the College of Communications, specially with the journalism perspective, are looking at ways to educate students so they are prepared to work in this environment and so that they are prepared to contribute to the enterprises that you are involved in and will be running. We are looking to do a couple of important things. One is to give our students access to state-of-practice technologies. We want them to be fluent with the best technologies that are being used in the business. We want to employ technology to enhance the experience of our faculty and our students. Because at the university we are very good at understanding things, we want to work with people in the business community to understand the user requirements, to do some of the testing, develop and use some of the methods and matrix that are important to driving forward the future of journalism. Learning to tell stories, an environment in which the audience often times has control of when, and how, they are going to be accessing those stories, it's a big challenge. That's one of the reasons we are here. I'm glad to be here and I'm glad you are too.

Griff Singer: May I say welcome on behalf of the Department of Journalism. Our Chairman Steve Reese is in El Paso in another time zone at another meeting and I'm delighted to be here to represent him and the department. We have some 800 journalism majors, and all are involved in news production in some way, traditional print, photographic and broadcast. As we move to the next millennium, we have already developed a curriculum that fits and meets, we hope, some of the things that you are talking about during this conference today, and that is new technology, new delivery, or enhanced delivery systems, a broadening if you will in the preparation of our students to meet the new needs and new demands. I'm delighted to tell you that our students are very, very much computer savvy. One of the problems that we have in some of our labs that we use in combination of lab and lecture, as well as practical work, we have some times to get a little stern and get them off the Internet because they are there at every opportunity. They know what they are about, they know what the opportunities are.

May I say welcome, I hope you have a great conference and we are delighted to be here as a part of it and to host you. Have a good meeting. Thank you very much.

Rosental Calmon Alves: I also want to welcome you, especially the panelists. I want to thank you for accepting this invitation and to come to beautiful Austin. I want to talk a little bit about the conference and what we have been doing here. My specialization, my chair here, is in international journalism. The reason I'm putting together this conference was a word problem. I stammer a little bit, and I'm always learning English, so one day I was trying to say International and I stopped in

1999 – International Symposium on Online Journalism

Internnnn and it became Inter--net. Now you understand why the International Journalism chair is organizing something like that. Just kidding.

Actually, I do have some experience in this field. I managed as an editor the creation of the Web edition for my old newspaper in Rio de Janeiro, which became the first in Brazil to jump on the Web and probably the first in Latin America. Maybe, because I am not sure about a Mexican newspaper, but their edition was put on the Web here in the U.S., actually. Well, Jornal do Brasil started with a presence on the Web in February 1995.
At that point, Brazil had 45,000 people on the Internet. Out of those, only 5,000 connected with the Web. The rest had only e-mail access. We were actually doing a newspaper on the Web for Brazilians out of the country. And now, just four years later, we have more than 3 million people on the Web. I mean, we are talking about 5,000 people just four years ago and more
than 3 million now.

Yesterday I was showing Sixth Street to a couple of panelists after dinner and we were in a tremendous traffic jam. And I couldn't understand it, since it was almost 11 p.m. and that was not time for a traffic jam. I found out later that it was caused by the people trying to reach the post office with their tax return before the midnight deadline. In Brazil now, we are in the same tax time, but the deadline is two weekes from now. I have just read that 800,000 Brazilians have already filed their income tax on the Web. It's unbelievable this kind of move.

When I started that Internet experience, I had already put together the first financial service online in Rio, in 1991. So when I became the Knight Chair in International Journalism, I couldn't resist looking at everything that was going on in the marketplace in terms of online journalism. And I decided to create a class here on online journalism. I had wonderful support from the department and the college for doing this, although I had some warning advice from my colleagues. Some of them saying, "Rosental, there is no such thing as online journalism." Others saying, "It's too premature to do that." One of them reminded me that he was in Michigan University and they had a course on videotext. And they said, "You know, it failed. We are going through the same thing."

I said, "Give me a break. Don't compare videotext with the Web." At that point, when were discussing that, we had 50 million people on the Web and videotext were just a bunch of small experiences around the country. I mentioned in that discussion with some colleagues, "You know, we had this discussion here before." "No, it's the first time."

"No, we had it, not we physically, but someone here by the end of the 1930s some professor here said, 'Look, radio is becoming important as a form of journalism. Especially after the Munich crisis in 1938, radio became a journalistic medium, so why not start studying how we are going to use radio for journalism?'"

1999 – International Symposium on Online Journalism

And then in the 1960s probably somebody said here, "'Television after the Kennedy assassination would become an important journalistic medium, it would look for its language etc." We feel like we have to understand what you guys are doing out there. We have to learn from you. We have to teach. We have to study. We have to experiment on this. So I think it is very important. Even if you fail with that, even if this is going to be a disaster or in a couple of years from now you shut down all your operations, I think it's such a big phenomenon that we really have to prepare our students to go there. We are not teaching softwares. We are not teaching any kind of crystallized knowledge
because there is no such thing. We are teaching adaptability. We are teaching flexibility. What we say to our students is that they have to be prepared to learn and learn fast because things are changing fast. That's the message.

I'm not going to talk about the other things that I prepared, but I want to explain a little bit the four panels. First panel is profitability and ethics because I think the big question is, Is there really a feasible business model for online journalism? We haven't found it yet, I think, but anyway there are experiments etc. Why I have this idea of putting this business issue together with ethics? Because my radar here is detecting some stuff. Like the fact that some of you guys were hired in 1995-96 and those corporate guys gave you time for a project and said you have to make money. I feel like this is the moment that the pressure for money is maybe on the border of affecting editorial integrity. This is just something I suspect, I'm not sure about that so I wanted to ask you about that and that's the reason I put the two issues together.

Integrating newsrooms and products is another challenge. I'm always impressed when I talk to people in traditional newsrooms and they say, "I have nothing to do with those Internet guys." Some of them told me, "They are vampires. They are here to suck my blood, my work." On the other hand I see other newsrooms that are completely integrated. So I think this is a real
challenge and we are very curious about this new concept that newspaper companies were companies to produce newspapers and now they are information companies. They are redefining their businesses and you have to have integration to do that.

Storytelling is another challenge in this new medium. The radio was newspaper read on the air in the beginning or it still is in some places. But ventually the radio found its language, journalistic language. Television was radio with images in the beginning. So history proves that it is natural that you are mainly doing shovelware, you are doing mainly re-purposing stories from the old medium. But you are searching for a language. I don't know which language is better, but I know that you are experimenting. You have lots of experiences with non-linear narrative in storytelling, maybe it has already failed and you are giving up on this. But that's the idea of this panel.

The last panel is the big picture. I want all the panelists to participate in the other panels also in the audience, and I want if possible the last panel will be a wrap-up session and would give the big picture of this new field.

4

1999 – International Symposium on Online Journalism

I'm so happy that you are here. I want to thank you very, very much for coming. I want also to thank the people who helped me to put this conference together, Ian Tennant, Maria Sacchetti, Charlene Vandini, Jessica Berthold, and James Rowe who are volunteers helping me with that. Also, Humayan Hasan and Charles Soto who helped me with the technology and the Webcasting. I also want to thank Manda Rash and Cleota Gambino who helped with the administration aspects of the event. So welcome. Well, I'm five minutes late only. It's wonderful!