

2006 – International Symposium on Online Journalism

Opening Session

Panelists:

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

Rod Hart, Dean, College of Communication, UT Austin

ROSENTAL CALMON ALVES: I want to introduce you to Dean Rod Hart, the Dean of the College of Communication, and I asked him to come this morning and talk a little bit about the College. But beforehand, I will just brief him a little bit about the wonderful day we had yesterday. I think we... yesterday had... we started with Professor Robert Picard, who is the only academic that I know that is a full professor in three continents. He is a full professor in Sweden, in the United States, and in China. And I don't know how he does that, but he seems to have some secret cloning situation.

And then we had a series of panels on the status of online journalism in the United States and in the world, that was - I think - very impressive. The reason why the auditorium is not that full today is because - you know - the Friday night fever in Austin is very tempting, and I think there are some people still looking for the hotel. [laughter]

But anyway, we did have a very good debate yesterday about the dramatic changes of the media and the repercussion of the digital revolution in, especially, newspapers. Maybe because I have ink in my veins instead of blood, since I come from that Gutenbergian medium, we had an emphasis on what's going to happen with the newspaper. We had people from the industry here, like the editor-in-chief of the New York Times Online, the executive editor of the Washington Post, and people from the Pew players, or MSNBC... And I think the future - you know - there were moments where it was very sad about what's going to happen with the newspaper industry, but other moments that were... with plenty of optimism, of how the newspapers can do the transition to this new era. So, I was very proud that the - and I have to report that the New York Times editor was interviewing our students, and hopefully he is going to hire a bunch of them. [laughter]

And also that we debated a little bit how journalism education should adapt to this new era, and I think I can tell you that we are doing a good job in terms of giving the kids knowledge on technical stuff that is new, and were not required before, and now it's indispensable. So I just want you to welcome our guest, and [to Dean Hart] I know you have the Honors Day today, that you cannot stay here for the whole day, so...

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ROD HART: Well, it's a pleasure to be here, and I would stay a lot longer. It's either stay here with all you wonderful people, or go and preside over a thousand parents who are going to be honoring their students. I must tell you, as captivating as all of you are [laughter], I will go where a thousand parents have come from all parts of the state of Texas to honor their children who've done well in school. But it is a pleasure to be with you for this time - for the little time that I can be here.

I'm very, very interested in the work that all of you are doing. I think it's - we are in an age of great question - about all of these phenomena. I was at a conference... the Carnegie Corporation in New York has selected UT as one of ten journalism programs that is charged with speculating about the future of journalism education. And we've been given money - all of the schools have been given money from Carnegie to try out new kinds of courses on campus. And the other schools have done some very interesting things, thinking about how journalism and the arts are being managed today, and what kind of relationships there are. There are a lot of new media kind of projects in the schools. Some of the things we're doing here: Maggie Rivas Rodriguez is going to teach a course looking at the ways in which new Americans are being informed by the daily paper - or not. And so it's a very interesting and kind of evocative time.

From where I sit, the real question is: we're told we're in an information age. I think, to some extent, that's sort of obvious; it's something of a cliché. I think the real question is whether we're going to be in a knowledge age. As I see, journalism is about - there's always been a lot of information around. What journalists do is turn information into knowledge. And so the real question is about this knowledge instinct. What's going to nurture that? We've never been able to get as much information as we can per unit time, because of all the digital and web-based revolutions. But the fact of the matter is we human beings still need some period of sleep in a given day, so gathering information is now becoming, in some senses, a crisis in our times.

So the question of where journalism will go... I'm kind of an optimist on this, because I think that the knowledge instinct is going to overwhelm the random selection of information sources. People need to know what things mean. They don't - they need data bytes, and all the rest of that stuff, but they really - they need to know what things mean. And I think journalism has always been in the business of saying what things mean. And so - as journalism is transforming itself, it seems to me that what it has to do is, more than anything, is remember that it's in the business of knowledge. It's not in the business of information. Yes, information's important. But, at the end of the day, most people really want to know: How does this affect my life? What is this war, and what chances it would be that my son might be called up in some kind of a draft? Are these - is this good employment situation going to continue in the United States? What are we going to do with people who want to come to the United States, legal or illegally, to work for us? What does it mean that citizenship is being made a very complex thing in the United States today? So I think - I think the knowledge business will always be there, because we human beings simply cannot get through the day without knowing what things

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mean. And I guess we're going to learn about what things mean very differently in the years in the future, than we have in the past, but that's OK too.

Our College is sort of poised to enter this world, I'm hoping, in a number of interesting ways. I've taken on, as my job as Dean, to try to raise money for a new building. Our College has four thousand wonderful students, and we could have a lot more if we didn't - if we had the capacity. That's a lot of students, and we are in five different departments, sort of tracking the old platforms of information: radio, and television, and print journalism, and broadcast journalism, and advertising. But what I'm proposing - and now beginning to try to talk to folks in the state of Texas, and to the friends that we already have, and my job is to make some new friends, in order to raise the money needed to raise the building. We're tentatively calling it the Texas Center for New Media. And really, what the building is designed to do is to take these five wide-ranging departments, that deal with all these individual platforms, and to conceive of a new way of doing communication education, taking into consideration the fact that all of these platforms are changing, right before our eyes. And the students today - I'm sure some of you have been talking about this - are going to need to be trained differently than, perhaps, they were in the past. In part because language itself is changing, and the kind of writing that will be done for the digital media probably will be a bit different than was written and used for print media. In part because visual communication is coming at us in unprecedented ways, and we need to know how those things are going to be delivered, and what they mean. And so the hope is that this new building will be a place, a meeting ground, for all of the different ways in which communication is being generated. And an ability - really, the building will help us not only research these phenomena, things that Rosental and others have been interested about in a long time, but also to provide some new ways of experimenting with the kind of communication education that's going to be needed for what is clearly going to be the digital millennium.

So that's the job I've taken on for myself, as Dean. I believe the university has been very helpful in standing behind me as we launch this project, and I hope a few years from now, when you come back to the annual digital journalism conference, that we will have a much more commodious situation (laughter) for you to be in, that we will be in a space that is genuinely appropriate for the kind of projects that all of you are taking on, and that the people here on the campus are taking on.

One of the things that - when I took the job, and thought about the College, and all these different ways that things are happening - we have people in the College that are looking at the ways in which technology is changing the workplace, people who study organizational communication, realizing that work in the United States has really changed, in some pretty interesting ways. It took me a while - my wife works for IBM - it took me a while to realize that when she said, "I've got to get to a meeting," that she wasn't going to leave the house. And I noticed that she wasn't quite prepared to leave the house (laughter), and she just simply went to her study, in the office, and got on to a meeting, and it had to be at six o'clock in the morning because of time warping in different parts of the world, at which they could all get together, and sometimes it's eleven o'clock at night when she goes to her meeting.

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That's an interesting phenomenon. I keep asking her how things are going, because she had been a person who went - got in the car and drove to work, much of her career. That's not happening nearly as much anymore, so the whole question about whether IBM needs a building in Austin or just needs a lot of wires to get to people's homes - how that's going to change the workplace. She has developed very close relationships with people she has never met. And that's a really interesting phenomenon. And, I mean, close relationships - where they are - sometimes they'll be talking about aging parents, and sick children, and what all that means, and she really hopes to meet some of these people someday, but it's possible that she won't, and still have kinds of networks and friendships at home and in the workplace that are really unprecedented.

Parts of our College are looking at new ways of making film. We have a very imaginative program here, called Burnt Orange Productions, in which we're making feature films, the only university in the world who's ever attempted this. And last - within the last eighteen months, we've had a hundred and forty undergraduates participate in the making of three feature films, the first of which sold very handsomely and was debuted at the Toronto Film Festival. But these are digitally-based films. These are films that are going to be... that are going to look a little different than the old kind of sixteen millimeter sort of things, but they're also developing new software that will soften the digital image, so that the digital movies that are being produced will look and feel like the sixteen millimeter films that they are replacing, thereby combining modernity with nostalgia, all at once.

And so - and then, of course, the things that you all have been talking about here, in journalism, and the ways in which those things are changing. So we live - we live on the cusp of an exciting new era, and my hope is that journalism will always remember that it's in the knowledge business, and not in the information business. It's a pleasure for me to make a transition now to introduce your first speaker for the day. His name is Dr. Maxwell McCombs. I believe him to be the most famous journalism professor in the world. I cannot prove that. [laughter]. And I -

ROSENAL CALMON ALVES: I agree. I agree. [laughter]

ROD HART: I shouldn't have said that in front of a group of journalists, who will say "Hmmm... I'm gonna go check that out." [laughter] But I invite you to do that, because it's possible that someone somewhere is better known, but I would wonder how that would be possible. And it's - what's interesting about this man is that he's really had one question, for his career. And it's a terrific question. And it's a large question. And the question has changed, and taken on new dimension all the time. And he keeps asking the question in very, very different and interesting ways. And I think that - I'll let him lay out the details of the question, but basically it is the question about what ways, what are the ways in which mass media, particularly journalism, help structure the way we think.

Now, he wouldn't quite put it that way, I suspect. He's a much more precise man. But I think that, in a way, it's how we think as a result of looking at journalistic and

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other kinds of information coming to us. And what these structures of information do to us. The presuppositions we make, and journalism not only affects the things that we know, and can recall, but also the presuppositions that we have. What's important. And, if you ask most people what's important, and then you look at the kind of things that are being covered in the daily newspaper, you find an interesting coordination. Not always perfect, but often times very, very close. And it's this whole question of agenda-setting that Max particularly has pioneered, and has done hundreds - I don't know if it's thousands yet [laughter], but it must close to hundreds and hundreds of studies in very different contexts and different locales, and then his students have taken this basic question, about how does the mind work in the presence of journalistic information. They've taken it to all parts of the world. And he is, to the best of my knowledge, the foremost expert on these matters, but also - again - I think, one of the most distinguished and prolific scholars in the academic field of journalism. He's a wonderful, wonderful scholar, and a wonderful man, and a terrific friend to those of us here in Austin. And I welcome you all, and welcome Max McCombs. [applause]

MAX McCOMBS: Well, thank you very much, Rod.