

SPJ explores 'The State of Journalism' at kick-off event

By Jason Townsend-Rogers

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GAINESVILLE – The newspaper and railroad industries may not appear to have much in common, but according to University of Florida Professor Mike Foley, their circumstances are eerily similar.

“Newspapers for years always made fun of railroads. They always said, ‘we’re in the railroad business’ when if they just said ‘we’re in the transportation business,’ there wouldn’t be a FedEx, there wouldn’t be a UPS. Now, as the Internet moved in, as Craigslist moved in and took all the classified ads, as all these other operations moved in, the newspapers continue to say ‘well, we are in the newspaper business.’ If they were in the information/advertising business, Craigslist would have been started by a newspaper, not by someone independent of a newspaper,” he said.

Musings and revelations like these about the state of journalism were exchanged at the speaking engagement for the North Central Florida Professional Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists. The engagement occurred on Thursday, September 25, 2009, at Pomodoro Café and was attended by about 20 individuals along with UF Professors Foley and David Carlson.

Carlson is also the executive director for the Center of Media Innovation and Research. Dean Blinkhorn, the editor-in-chief of Ocala Style Magazine was also present, along with Ana-Klara Hering, the chapter’s president and Jeanne Carlson, a retired journalist from The Gainesville Sun. Hering queried the trio on the current state of journalism in Florida. They highlighted issues such as newspaper staff layoffs, the recent newspaper-sharing agreements and the challenges faced by both journalism and journalists to adapt to the whims of technology.

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Hering began by querying Foley on what he has seen in staff cutbacks affecting papers like the St. Petersburg Times. He used this moment to reminisce about his working experiences at the Times, noting that he shared working at the afternoon newspaper with The Evening Independent and they were both owned by the same individual. He added that even though the newsrooms competed with one another, every other aspect of management, such as advertisement sales, was helmed by a singular individual. He cleverly observed how publications in Florida were actually revisiting this cycle, which he thought “was not a bad idea.”

Foley used this moment to recall a “golden age” of journalism in Florida, recounting that even though circulation director could take a day off from work, they would still see their circulation numbers improve from the year before, due to people moving in Florida.

In reflecting on newspapers in their present state, Foley summed up his opinions by noting that the customer service aspect of newspapers are important, citing examples such as subscribers of the Gainesville Sun having to receive their paper tomorrow should they fail to receive it on that day, along with long-term newspaper subscribers being penalized by having to pay more for their publications. While veteran subscribers pay the full rates, new subscribers pay half-price for a year.

“None of this makes any sense,” he said with a tone of disgust.

Foley closed by saying that until changes are made in these areas, the future of newspapers looks bleak. However, he ended on a positive note by saying that “everyone who wants a job will get a job; this is an exciting time because everything is being reinvented, yet there will always be a demand for storytellers and people who can gather information.”

Hering latched on to the idea of “reinvention” to query Carlson about the establishment of the Center for Media Innovation and Research. However, he chose to reiterate the problems faced by newspapers in adapting to the changing needs of journalism.

“Newspapers are highly resistant to change; they have relied on other sectors of the economy to invent new technology that newspapers have then adopted,” Carlson said.

He noted that historically, 40 cents out of every dollar for newspapers’ revenue came from advertising; that figure has since dwindled to 20 cents for every dollar and dropping due to Internet-based advertisements.

Despite his doubts, he, like Foley, remains confident about the future of journalism since the advances in technology provide the opportunity for more exciting content. However, he mentioned one key problem that could prevent this progress.

“Too many newsrooms are run by people our age, who are praying that they could make it to retirement without actually having to change,” he said.

After these exchanges, Hering noted that newspapers were choosing to discontinue their monthly memberships with The Associated Press; she then went into the next topic of discussion: newspaper sharing agreements. These agreements essentially allow newspapers to share editorial content with one another, while keeping specific items, such as investigative pieces, separate.

Hering asked Foley, Carlson and Dean their opinions on the agreements, as well as whether they will ultimately benefit journalism in the long term.

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Carlson commented that this is a practice already administered by The Associated Press, as they have many different offices, they cooperate with local papers in distributing stories around the world; in exchange, the papers can run anything that The AP has, for a fee.

Foley's response to this question was that while this agreement is a good idea, investigative pieces are affected due to the fact that they are expensive to produce; unless they are going to pay off in the end, they are generally not worth the time to produce. It was also agreed that if newspapers do not compete with one another, then the investigative tales do not get produced.

Carlson took this opportunity to mention that although less people are reading the newspaper, individuals are still finding ways to obtain news, even if it is through other means, such as the Internet. He also reminded people present that the information observed today comes from newspapers themselves.

Adrianna Rodriguez, a masters student in communications at UF, asked whether the weakest papers in South Florida will fold to become one big paper, and if that will be the case in states such as Maine and Ohio.

"There will always be a market for local news," said Carlson in response to this question, adding that "it will never go out of business."

Hering concluded the presentation by asking about the role of journalism schools in training journalists. Specifically, as they are designed to train new journalists, what to do with the more seasoned journalists who don't have high-tech skills?

"Shoot them," Foley said without hesitation.

Carlson was more measured in his response, saying “we all have to update our skills; among the goals of the new center is to tunnel between the silos that exist in the college of journalism.”

Jessica Zimmer, a freelance reporter who attended the discussion, enjoyed the proceedings, but wished that the newspaper sharing agreements progressed beyond what the professors mentioned.

“It would be interesting to see newspapers from different countries share stories, particularly in South Florida, with Spanish-language publications from Argentina, Cuba or Venezuela, as those stories are important to people from South Florida,” she said.

She also took issue with their claims that the print media market was shrinking; to her, it just needs to change.

“Many newspapers and magazines are starting to include online digital content,” she said.

Hernando Zambrano, the program adviser for the UF Study Abroad Services, also enjoyed attending the discussion, as it allowed him to learn more about the media as well as the issues affecting newspapers and journalism as a whole.

Nathan Perry, a second-year law student at UF, found the event informative as well. He enjoyed having the opportunity to hear about journalism from the print perspective, as he came from a broadcasting background.

While many of the respondents were pleased with the occasion, they wished that the event could have explored the issues in more depth. Perry, in particular, called for a broadcast perspective to be included in future discussions.

“I think that the experiences in both the broadcast and print sides of journalism are very similar,” he said.

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