

2001 – International Symposium on Online Journalism

Opening Session

Panelists:

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

Stephen Reese, Director, School of Journalism, University of Texas at Austin

ROSENAL CALMON ALVES: ...Here on this Good Friday in the morning so early and I apologize for scheduling this on a Good Friday. I have already apologized with God. I'm feeling so guilty. I'm Catholic, so you know. But I was so busy that I hadn't actually realized that this was a Good Friday when I scheduled it. But I should have noticed that it was kind of easy to find a room available in such short notice.

Anyway, first and one of the most important things for our guests we're going to speak from here. There is a dangerous trap here. You know, the table is in a place that you have to be very careful when you move the chair because there is no space here. So please be careful and don't sue me and be careful here with our friend Walter Cronkite. Anyway, I think that this symposium is happening in an extraordinary moment for online journalism. It's really like Eric told me when I invited him, maybe a defining moment for the future of online journalism.

I started teaching online journalism here at this university in 1997 and it's (inaudible). I always remember when we were discussing in the faculty meeting - should we start this program in the school and a couple of colleagues kept saying, you know, it's too premature. Maybe this is another fad, another thing like videotext for instance. I said, oh, give me a break. I mean, videotapes were just small experiment and small, the number of people using it. We have 50 million people using the web at that time when we were discussing. Since then I've been telling this story with a lot of pride saying these colleagues although very well intentioned, they were wrong. Online journalism is going. But now when I tell this, lots of people say, maybe they were right. I did that in a meeting with the president of the University just a week ago and on the table several colleagues from other departments were saying, well, maybe they were right with the dotcom going down, maybe you are wrong and there no such a thing as online journalism. I do believe there is such a thing as online journalism. I think there is some roller coaster effect. It's very natural in adoption of new technologies that sometimes there is a depression, but then the cart goes up again. We saw that (inaudible) but in any case now it's very special. So it's really a privilege to present this lineup of people here to discuss this in this moment. I, as you know I'm from Brazil, and in Brazil since you are a kid, you learn about the podaroca. Podaroca is an extraordinary phenomenon when the Amazon meets the Atlantic Ocean. It's such a strong phenomenon that you can hear the

2001 – International Symposium on Online Journalism

collision of the water sometimes from kilometers away you can hear that and it's so powerful that it takes part of the edge of the border of the river. I think what's going on with the Internet now is a sort of a virtual podaroca. The new economy that was (inaudible) in very fast, very artificial means is not meeting the real economy. It's meeting reality. We are suffering now the effects of the podaroca. I think journalism has a very good strategic place in this podaroca. Because I think that's in the end what really counts after lots of attempts at artificial business and no business at all in some of the dotcoms that are disappearing unfortunately. But anyway, the strategic position in my opinion of the old media on the Internet is very (inaudible) and actually is stronger now. Especially journalism. I do believe that I was right in 1997 when I was starting this course here and I think that it's impossible that there is no business plan for sustaining this. It's impossible that the New York Times and the Washington Post are having 2.5 million to .7 million visitors in a month and there is no business value in that. Or the emails that people, millions of people receive, that the Wall Street Journal is charging for it and has more than half a million people paying and those millions of people that are reading news on the web every day. And I think that the Internet generation is still to come. I mean we have to wait for the people who were ten years old when I was creating my course here and who are coming to the market in a few years from now. People who have never seen the world without computers, without database mentality. So I'm very (inaudible) that it is going to work. Well, before I asked my friend Steve Reese to welcome you in the name of the School of Journalism, I want to thank Rick Stevens, my assistant and Cindy Royal and Maricella Murdocks, and Chris Powell and Habi Bata, the students who helped me to organize this and the volunteers to help organize this. Which means that I am not paying them. But I'm appreciative Without them I wouldn't have been able to organize this. So thank you.

STEPHEN REESE: Thank you very much and welcome to the School of Journalism and College of Communications. It's my pleasure to be the person to welcome you with my colleague Rosental. I'm delighted to help support Professor Alves in this enterprise and I really think you'd have to agree he's got a great job with the help of this Knight Chair. When he's curious about something or wants to make sure he's keeping on the cutting edge of some latest trends, he just calls together all of the experts he can think of and holds a symposium. It's quite a luxury. Plus it gives them a chance to get out of the office and have a little barbecue in Austin from time to time. It's the only thing that gets him out of the office. But he only has to walk a few yards from next door here.

I'll just make a brief comment or two. I've used up I think most of what I know about online journalism on the First Annual Online Symposium that you held, so I'll just make a brief remark. I do think this is a good time to take a look at the Internet and journalism as Rosental mentioned. Following the NASDAQ technology bubble and the rush to get online with anything, perhaps now we can take a more clear-eyed view about what online journalism is all about.

I'm particularly interested in the journalism education panel to come later this afternoon. Like other programs, we've rushed to develop our website, offer courses in the online area as Rosental mentioned with his (inaudible) since an experiment for

2001 – International Symposium on Online Journalism

web support for our courses. Of course we continue to have many questions about how best to organize for education in this area. Especially in this area. It's not an area where yet we've had people who have been in the new media area and come into academia with that kind of professional background. So it's really especially vital that we have conversations like this with people who are out there now and involved in it.

We've begun to feature in one case that comes to mind, student work in a UT gallery an online presentation of student work on our website. Recently a man mentioned one story concerning child abuse. He called me on the phone complaining about how he was depicted in the story. He wanted to add a clarification in the story concerning his role as a child abuser. Possibly linked to his own website from the story. Well, of course this raises an important issue of what the response is analogous to. Is it like a letter to the editor in a traditional newspaper? Is it like a correction run by the news organization staff? What is the length going to be to - how would we know what ultimately is contained there. Is it responsible to use our web pages for such unknown links. So even within this academic setting we continue to have many questions about how best to exploit this new medium. Not just refinement to the model from the old media.

Elsewhere of course like other schools, we've been encouraged to experiment with putting courses online. Get anything online just as long as it's online seems to be the goal. I suppose in that respect we're not as advanced as many schools who have had to be more innovative by necessity. But often lost in these discussions, I think, is the basic goal. Is it to improve education that we already do? Or is it to teach more with less? Kind of an efficiency model. I noted recently with interest in MIT's decision for example to make all of their course website material available to the public free of charge. I think that's a move that resonates very well with the academic community and it reminds us that our core objective is education. We're in the business of education, not the business of business. So I think there are a lot of developments that I'd like to know more about and be able to understand better.

That's all just to say that we have as many questions in the academy as I'm sure there are in the professional community. So with this symposium today, it's an effort by our school and the Knight Chair Program, Rosental, to hold this conversation with the best experts that he could entice to travel to Austin on this weekend. We hope it will inform the thinking being done here and in the news media as well. And again, welcome. I'm looking forward to the discussion and conversation.

ROSENTAL CALMON ALVES: Thank you Stephen and now I think we can proceed and have our first panel. Remember that there is a trap here and Mr. Walter is looking at us.