

The State of Journalism in America

Totem Report May 2, 2018

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“Zip-a-dee-doo-dah” echoed through our meeting room as Virginia McKenzie led us in spirited song; perhaps a good counterpoint to the sober discussion of the main program, “The State of Journalism in America”.

Executive Editor of KCTS and Crosscut, Greg Hanscom, engaged two nationally known, award-winning former journalists from ABC and NBC in a thoughtful discussion on the challenges of journalism today. Neal Karlinsky (ABC) is now with Amazon and Hanson Hosein (NBC) is at the University of Washington as Director of Communications Leadership.



President Mark Wright introduced the panel by reminding the audience that journalism is the only profession explicitly protected by the Constitution of the US (see Amendment 1).

In response to the question, “Are these the best of times or the worst of times for journalism?” Hosein said that it is both. Technology is giving us more information, but the flip side is that we are tending to read the information and opinions that are like ours rather than engage in finding common ground. The “best of times” is that people are supporting reputable news sources: the New York Times’s readership is up by 300,000 and locally KUOW has seen the number of donors and donations rise, while Crosscut has tracked heightened attention through more visits. Karlinsky concurred that these times have brought more people into the fold of well known, reputable journalism.



Hosein said that he left NBC in 2004 because the network was too slow to increase its use of technology and he no longer wanted to be in monolithic news organizations. Today he said we have fragmented journalism, and content which is not necessarily written by journalists. Trained journalists must compete with those opinions and we do not have consensus on what is fact.

Karlinsky left ABC in 2017 as he watched the news operation endure a “firehose” of social media which caused them to reset what were the lead stories all day long. Ultimately, management said that research is worthless, except the weather which all viewers want. The job became one of “chasing eyeballs” with weather catastrophe stories taking the place of thoughtful journalism.



The panelists agreed that for readers the challenge is to separate the wheat from the chaff of fake news. Karlinsky said the term is defined by the President as anything that does not agree with him, and then there is very real fake news as in the trolling of social media by those intent on disruption through falsehoods.

They agreed that journalists must behave differently and be transparent about how they do their work. We are in an era of distrust and both consumers and journalists have to be accountable. Hosein commented that the decline of trust began in the late 1980s and that technology is accelerating it. And there are multiple examples of untrustworthy behaviors, evidenced by the #MeToo movement, videos of police actions, etc. He said that we are in a historic time of transition and that in the next five to ten years, through artificial intelligence and blockchain, things will totally change journalism. He emphasized that trustworthy relationships are collaborative ones and that will have to be expanded. Through podcasts, Alexa, and other technologies “we are rebuilding the ship in the middle of the ocean.”

Karlinsky said that the networks must reinvent themselves and that is a very difficult challenge when on ABC alone the morning show has up to five million viewers and the evening newscast has up to nine million. The revenue model is very lucrative and hard to change, but the majority of viewers are older and younger viewers are not watching network news. The networks see the cliff coming.

In response to audience members’ questions, the panel said that unnamed sources should be used sparingly, but whistleblowers are still key. Computer animation can now fake video and soon, visuals will no longer matter to viewers. There will be more regulation on technology companies that are gathering personal data from individuals.

President Mark closed the program with a call to become media literate, exhorting us to know as much as possible about where we get information. And finally, that we find common ground with others to reduce our respective defensive stances and try to understand each other.

In the opening invocation, George Twiss quoted Nelson Mandela who said, “I have never lost, I have either won or learned.” It was a good reminder that as we inform ourselves and search for common ground with others, we are either winning or learning.

