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Media panel addresses terrorism, current criticism

by Kellie Meehlhause

During a panel discussion Tuesday, Sept. 11, MSUM students and faculty received more than just a media perspective on the war on terrorism. The event also gave the audience a chance to address recent criticism of the media, particularly the media's portrayal of the war in Iraq and the industry's future.

Mass Communications Professor Martin Grindeland, KVRR-TV News Director Jim Shaw and Forum Editor Matthew Von Pinnon made up the panel while retired MSUM professor Marvin Bossart served as moderator.

This event was part of the college's annual remembrance of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Past events included a presentation on the science of terrorism and a

Canadian perspective of Sept. 11.

"This is one of those events where all of us can remember where we were on that day," Bossart said, before asking each of the panelists to describe their memories of Sept. 11.

Like most Americans, Shaw said, he heard about the first plane crash while getting ready for work. He first believed that it was an accident, but "everything changed when the second plane hit."

He remembered spending the rest of the day trying to find different angles about the attacks by visiting local schools or churches.

"As a newsperson, you can't watch and reflect," Shaw said. "You have to go out and talk to this person or that person."

Covering untold stories became a priority for Grindeland as well. As he and numerous students and faculty watched the day's events unfold in the mass

communications office, his students recorded footage that was later used for a documentary on Islamic America.

Like Shaw, Von Pinnon recalled the emotional anguish most reporters felt while simultaneously trying to write articles about the event.

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"When something this big happens, you're not really sure where to go, what to do. The people who are reporting it are experiencing it at the same time," Von Pinnon said.

Shaw added that we now live in an age where people want information as quickly as possible. The best way for reporters to handle their assignments is to put themselves in the mind of the reader.

At this point, the discussion turned away from Sept. 11 to the current criticism the media has endured. Political science professor Andrew Conteh asked the panelists how they would respond to accusations that the media liked terrorism because it helped increase ratings.

Grindeland answered that there isn't a cause-effect relationship between terrorism and the media



The panel consisted of, from left the right: Matthew Von Pinnon, Martin Grindeland and Jim Shaw.

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reporting about it. On the contrary, the media has to be careful that, when reporting about a suicide bomber, for example, that they don't support or glorify the action.

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Shaw replied, "I'd be happy if we never cover terrorism again. However, 9/11 was a catastrophic event, and anything less than full coverage isn't fair to the viewers. We try to report it from different angles because it's important for us to know how people view America."

Von Pinnon added, with the widespread availability of the Internet, terrorist propaganda is "out there in spades." The best way to counteract this is not to ignore it but to get the information out.

When asked about the belief that the media only reports the bad world events, the panelists again emphasized the need for viewers and readers to know what is going on and why people hate America. According to Von Pinnon, Americans are sheltered from negativity in the media when compared to international media coverage, where unedited photos of mutilated soldiers appear.

"Coverage at the beginning of the war should have been better," Grindeland said. "A nonviolent

angle should have been considered, and we should have asked more questions."

However, Grindeland said, international news coverage has gotten better since Sept. 11 as people have taken more interest in what's happening outside U.S. borders.

Another question asked by Conteh concerned the responsibility of the media in getting the U.S. into the Iraqi war as well as the relationship with the government.

Shaw described dealings with the government as "a double-edged sword." While reporters need the government sources, they also want to tell stories that need to be told.

"It's even harder to challenge the government when readers don't want you to. The public needs to be more supportive because it's better to keep tabs on the government than to be its lapdog," Shaw said.

Grindeland responded that the government would often like the media to do public relations for them, but that's not their job.

As for the War in Iraq, Von Pinnon described the difficulty the media felt in going against a government d e t e r m i n e d

to go to war. While there were reporters who checked facts and asked questions, they faced a lot of pressure from the presses, who wanted "to stay in the government's good graces."

The final question asked of the panelists regarded how they see the media changing in the rise of extreme commentators like Bill O'Reilly and Anne Coulter.

While Shaw categorized Coulter and O'Reilly more as TV stars than journalists, Von Pinnon explained that advocacy journalism is something that will become more and more prominent in the media in the future.

"They can help keep journalism honest," Von Pinnon said. "I'm troubled by its proliferation though."



Marv Bossart, left, and Andrew Conteh listen as the panel discusses Conteh's question.