

Dean Dianne Lynch 9 Enflaming the News

Skip: The other issue I wanted to talk about is just, responsibility vis-a-vi the manner of presentation of the news by responsible reporters. I'll give an example. In this cartoon controversy, there were reported demonstrations of three hundred people. Three hundred is a very small group, and yet, if you listen to CNN, which a billion people in the world probably do at some point, you would think this was a cataclysmic demonstration. The media shot is a very close-up, so it shows all sorts of things happening hither and yon, and it doesn't show that if you backed off the shot, there would be people standing here, and there would be people walking back and forth to work and going to McDonalds across the street.

Lynch: That's not the story.

Skip: I understand that's not the story, but it is incitement. It starts to incite, it starts to enflame.

Lynch: What it does is it presents an inaccurate picture of the context of the event. But journalists forever have been driven by an interest in, both a personal and professional interest in the big story. The notion that even three hundred people would riot about a cartoon makes it a story.

Skip: I understand it's a story, and I'm not trying to object to that.

Lynch: It's just not in context, and you're right.

Skip: And my point is, isn't there a balance between reporting the news and enflaming the news? Because of the way you report or what you report, you're actually enflaming the situation.

Lynch: Yes, and I don't want you to hear me defending the way they're covering this, because I'm not defending it. But what I'm suggesting, or at least I'm pointing out I guess, is that historically, culturally, professionally, journalists will always focus tightly on the story, so whatever that story is. There's a body? Sad but true, there's a car accident and the first thing a journalist is going to say is "did anybody die?".

Skip: Sure.

Lynch: So the level of news value diminishes as you widen out that scope. It's always the case –

Skip: I understand that on individual stories.

Lynch: You're talking about the range of stories.

Skip: I'm talking about the range of stories perhaps, and also just this balance between presenting the news and using freedom of the press as opposed to enflaming the situation. I'll give you a couple of examples that I have been very concerned about. Around July the 20th, Nick Robertson, who's an extremely respected correspondent, and who I also respect for all that he's done over many years, in that particular story, I don't know if it was his idea, but somebody's idea, he gave a three and a half minute dissertation on how to build a bomb. He had an IRA former terrorist bomb-making talking with him in shadows in this thing, and his justification during the story was "well, it's OK to do this story, because how to build a bomb is on the internet". I'm not saying he taught how to build a bomb in this story. However many listeners there were, there were some that didn't know that you could build a bomb from the internet. So how does that fit in to the ethics that you teach here at the Park School?

Lynch: Well, it doesn't, I would say that it doesn't, except that, again, how many steps do you take back? Does he have the right to do that? Yes. Would I defend his right to do that? Yes. Do I think it's good journalism? No. Do I think he made a mistake in terms of his decisions about how to best serve his audiences? Yes. Do I understand why he did it in terms of ratings, and the fact that months later people are still talking about it? Yep, because that's the business. And if people say "hey, let's do a story about how to build a bomb. Yeah, that's a great idea". Not, one of the ethical implications is who are we reaching, what's the information. And you can bet that somebody at that production meeting said "well, we're going to get a lot of flack about this, what are we going to say?" and somebody else said "yeah, you can get it on the internet, this is no big deal". For years –

Skip: And the counter-balance to that is people like me, who go out and buy a portable television studio and go around and talk about it –

Lynch: There are no people like you. You're the only one. Just so we're clear. There aren't people like you, there aren't people like you, this is it. But that's why you're doing it. Blogging is not unlike that and I think there is a universe of community journalists, people who are seriously concerned about the state of the American media, and they should be.