

slug: ALMA panel
date: 2009-09-17

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Describing Arizona as ground zero for the immigration debate, ALMA panelists raised questions about the lessons and responsibilities journalists face when covering contentious issues during an open Arizona Latino Media Association discussion hosted by the Walter Cronkite School on Thursday.

With Arizona State professor and former Sacramento Bee editor Rick Rodriguez moderating, journalists Valeria Fernandez,

Veronica Sanchez, and Paul Espinosa described their experiences from finding stories to dealing with sources.

Rodriguez said that initial questions are often the most important when covering a story.

“When you start looking about it and start imaging, ask yourself what you want to know, what’s missing in the story, and start following it,” said Rodriguez.

Veronica Sanchez, a reporter for 12 News, said her biggest challenge is time constraints and urged the audience to pay attention to unofficial sources as well as official ones.

“The people affected are always around, you just have to pay attention as a journalist,” said Sanchez.

Paul Espinosa, a documentary filmmaker and professor at ASU, had similar advice, though his medium allows for more time per project.

“Certainly one of the things I’m looking for is good stories, as with anything I

journalism, stories that are compelling and engaging,” Espinosa said.

Espinosa added that he looks for subjects “who are really representative of the story,” and in his case, comfortable being in front of the camera. This involves putting time and effort in with his sources.

“I don’t show up and stick a camera in someone’s face and say, ‘Tell me your life story,’” Espinosa said.

The panel discussed how this is more complex with issues like immigration where sources may be afraid of the consequences of being identified in the media.

Espinosa said he had to “convince people that telling their stories...was something that made sense.”

“I was able to talk to them over a period of time and tell them that telling their story was a productive thing to do,” Espinosa said. “And that sharing their story with people with a broader audience was something that

could have potentially positive consequences.”

Valeria Fernandez, of the Independent Newspaper Association and former La Voz reporter, agreed with the building a rapport approach.

“Try to go to the places where other journalists are not going,” Fernandez said. “You basically try to get yourself into the community before things happen, before the breaking news, and all of the sudden you have all the stories coming to you ‘cause the people know you.”

Fernandez, like Sanchez and Espinosa, urged looking behind the headlines, explaining that “you’ll discover amazing stories of people and how they live their lives and it can turn into something bigger.”

Fernandez used a recent sheriff’s operation at a Phoenix swap meet as an example, describing it as “the sort of story you can’t just write about and leave it there.”

For Sanchez, an example of this type of story was that of a young girl who wanted to send a message to the president after her parents were caught in a similar raid at a Phoenix car wash.

Sanchez described her hesitations – the information was brought to them by an activist, and before interviewing the girl, Sanchez said she had to be sure the girl really wanted to speak to the media.

Sanchez said that once comfortable with the situation, she got a very powerful interview.

Espinsosa described similar concerns for sources in his work. He used his film “In the Shadow of the Law” as an example, showing a clip in which he avoided showing a source’s face as she walked to the bus stop and narrated her story.

Fernandez’s advice for building a rapport with people you don’t know much about is simple.

“Use your ignorance,” said Fernandez.

“Try the food, learn about different traditions, and share with them my ignorance...’show me”

Rodriguez added that this process creates a bond.

“Throw yourself on their mercies,” said Rodriguez. “And they may laugh at you and tease you but that’s part of the bonding process”

Fernandez said she has experienced this in more than one culture after moving to Phoenix from Uruguay.

“It’s just funny the things that people will tell you just because you have an accent and I had to find a way in to both cultures – the more Anglo community and the immigrant community”

Sanchez described how a colleague shouted her only Spanish phrase, “Que paso?”, at an arrested man being loaded into police vehicles. The colleague taped

everything he yelled back to her and got it translated at the newsroom, said Sanchez.

Audience members asked several questions about how the panelists viewed their roles and duties as journalists.

Carlos Galindo, a local radio personality, asked about the rights of law enforcement to confiscate or destroy media. This question was based on recent personal experiences with Maricopa County Sheriff's Officials, Galindo said.

While Sanchez has not experienced this, she has heard of colleagues who have.

"I'd continue filming them and film them telling me not to film – put the camera in their face and ask them, 'what'd you tell me? Don't film what?'" Sanchez said.

Espinosa, who noted he did not have the backing of a newspaper or broadcasts lawyers, said "those are basically fundamental questions about the freedom of press and should be challenged."

Rodriguez said he would try to question the department about their policy at an upcoming Cronkite School panel in November.

“I’d fight this all the way to the supreme court,” said Rodriguez. “I’d make them arrest me.”

Another audience member, who described himself as an activist, asked the panelists to describe how they think journalists should deal with sources who use inaccurate facts.

Rodriguez described journalists as myth busters who look for stories that haven’t been told.

Fernandez said it is important to avoid bias.

“More people will listen to what I’m writing because they see I’m trying to be balanced,” Fernandez said “If you try to include these shades, these colors we’re doing a service to these people.”

Sanchez said that sometimes her goal is to find people who don't have an opinion yet. Using the example of a source who was deeply torn about immigration issues, Sanchez said it's "interesting to show a person who hasn't made up their minds."

Espinosa said that too often people only listen to people they agree with.

"I think there's really a need for a lot more honest reporting, without defining what that is, precisely because more and more we have really divided camps."

Issues like immigration, security, and media access are deeply divisive, and are all active in Arizona at the moment.

Fernandez's conclusion was similar to Rodriguez's introduction.

"It doesn't matter on what side of the issues you stand," Fernandez said. "Arizona is like a window for how these policies could (18:50) stand in other parts of the country."