Election Season Provided 'Wake-up Call' for Traditional Media, Panel of Journalists Says

SALT LAKE CITY, Nov. 10 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- The way the presidential election was covered - and the public's reaction to it - was a wake-up call to traditional media that it must maintain its credibility if it is going to stay alive, leading journalists here told a National Press Club forum Thursday. (Logo: http://www.newscom.com/cgi-bin/prnh/20080917/NPCLOGO )

"On Tuesday night, for the first time in the history of the craft, there were so many voices that it was very difficult to separate the voice of what we would call traditional media and the voice of all the others," said Con Psarras, news director at KSL-TV, the Salt Lake City NBC affiliate. "That confuses people."

As the traditional news media goes through what he called "a painful transition," it must maintain its role as providers of credible, non-biased information, Psarras said. That may mean dropping anything that appears to be opinion, whether its columns or editorials or opinion blogs, he said.

"What we heard was this chorus of voices that boiled down to disrespect for old media," he said. "We heard it daily, and we heard it loudly, and it was disturbing. 'You're not covering this because you're biased' or 'this is a story that you have not sent reporters to investigate,' and 'I heard this on the Internet, and why aren't you reporting it.' Many, many times we have no answers to those questions that are satisfactory," he said.

Credibility is "a commodity we convey," he said. "If we lose that, we're out of business."

Psarras was speaking at one of the National Press Club's forums on "The First Amendment, Freedom of the Press and the Future of Journalism" the Club is holding around the country to mark its 100th anniversary. At each forum, the Club gathers a panel of leading local journalists to talk about where the news business is going and how to protect its core values.

This forum was co-sponsored by Utah State University and the University of Utah.

"I think it was a wake-up call for the media," said Terry Orme, managing editor of the Salt Lake Tribune. "For newspapers, the digital media presents some scary prospects. But it also presents a great opportunity. It puts us back into the breaking-news business. But our core mission remains the same ... to inform and explain, to investigate and to be the watchdog."

It took a while for the newspaper to get away from holding big stories until the next morning's edition, he said. Now it posts everything on the Web as soon as it is verified information.

The challenge, he said, is to provide the news where people want it and when they want it. But the paper cannot ignore its print edition, Orme said, because it is still making the money that supports everything else. Providing a credible news organization requires a lot of people and costs a lot, he said. No one has yet to come up with an alternative way to provide that revenue.

The newspaper, Orme said, must maintain the quality of the print product, aggressively push onto the Internet with breaking news, and develop niche publications that will bring in new money to pay for everything else.

Allowing readers and viewers to engage in a conversation about the news on the Web site is important, he said. But the newspaper must maintain the difference between journalism produced by the newspaper and opinion that comes from readers.

"You have to have a firewall between what you do as journalists and what you're getting from the outside," Orme said. "Because it is not journalism. It's no way, shape or form journalism."

Edward Pease, a journalism professor at Utah State University, said the "noise" generated by all of the new media is making it more difficult for traditional media to maintain its authority.

It is the job of the journalist to make sense of all that noise," he said. "I don't envy the challenges of..."
either the old technology or the new technology to figure out a way to have a voice that is authoritative. Given all the voices, having one or two or a handful of identifiable places where you can make sense of the world is a valuable thing."

Psarras said he doubted whether all of the traditional news organizations in Salt Lake City - four television stations and two newspapers -- would survive the transition. KSL-TV jumped early onto the Internet, beating Craigslist to become an online marketplace. Seeing the popularity of that, he said, the station built a news product around it.

"We incrementally added to the Web staff to the point where it started to scare some of the people in television," he said. "They fear that one day the old media would die and the new media would be born. We would turn the lights off on the TV studio and turn the lights on in the Web news room, and there would be all these people already there."

The next National Press Club Centennial Forum will be Monday, Nov. 10. The forum will be Webcast from the Club to journalism schools at universities in Alaska, Montana, Nebraska, South Dakota and Idaho. Anyone anywhere can watch the Webcast at www.visualwebcaster.com/NPCforum.

Details and highlights of these forums can be found at the National Press Club's Web site: www.press.org.

The NPC Centennial Forums program is sponsored by Aviva USA, one of the nation's fastest-growing life insurers (www.AvivaUSA.com). In addition, the company is funding the production and distribution of 12,000 DVD copies of the Club's centennial documentary, "The National Press Club: A Century of Headlines" and supplemental education materials.

Tom Godlasky, chief executive officer of Aviva North America, said, "Our partnership with the National Press Club is based on shared values and a belief that the First Amendment, freedom of speech and professional journalism are fundamental to democracy, personal freedom and free enterprise."

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

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ABOUT THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB:

The National Press Club is the world's leading professional organization for journalists. Founded in 1908, the Club has 3,500 members representing most major news organizations. Each year, the Club holds more than 2,000 events including news conferences, luncheons and panels, and more than 250,000 guests come through its doors.

SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING NATIONAL PRESS CLUB FORUMS

Nov. 10 Washington D.C. Webcast to the University of Alaska (Anchorage and Fairbanks) University of Nebraska, University of Idaho, University of South Dakota, and University of Montana

Nov. 12 Cleveland, Ohio

Nov. 13 Norman, Okla.

Nov. 13 Houston, Tex.

Nov. 17 Phoenix, Ariz.

Nov. 17 Minneapolis, Minn.

Nov. 18 San Diego, Ca.

Dec. 2 Indianapolis, Ind.

Dec. 3 Ann Arbor, Mich.

Dec. 8 Naples, Fla.

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