

Murrow winners look at future of news business

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By Joel Mills of the Tribune

Three recipients of WSU award agree the future will be nothing like the past



Robin Fields...



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PULLMAN - The recipients of this year's Edward R. Murrow awards from Washington State University have differing ideas about the future of the news business. But they all believe it will look nothing like its past.

Deborah Amos of National Public Radio and Judy Woodruff of the PBS "News Hour with Jim Lehrer" were given lifetime achievement awards by the Murrow College of Communication. Reporter Robin Fields accepted the first-ever Edward R. Murrow award for Media Entrepreneurship on behalf of ProPublica, a nonprofit provider of online journalism.

Amos started her career in public radio before spending 10 years in commercial and public television. She has since returned to public radio, and said its noncommercial, fundraising business model could be the way to move forward in the ever-changing news production landscape.

"In the last six months, it seems like every conversation I've had is about the future of journalism," Amos said, adding her belief the current newspaper model will not survive. "It was always an odd marriage of print journalism and advertising."

Now that the Internet has pulled the advertising rug out from under the newspaper business, it will have to discover and develop new revenue streams, she said.

Woodruff agreed almost everyone today gets their news online, and nobody pays for it. She said a new generation of television, radio and print news executives will have to learn how to keep producing the content that makes for a healthy, informed democracy.

"(The next generation has) the technical skills, they can do the multitasking," Woodruff said. "Now they just need to figure out the business model."

Fields offered the most concrete vision for the future of media, one that relies heavily on cooperation between news producing organizations.

For instance, ProPublica produces much of its work through partnerships with radio programs like "This American Life" on NPR, newspapers like the L.A. Times and the Washington Post, and television programs like "60 Minutes" and "Frontline."

Those collaborations are paying off. Last week, ProPublica won a Pulitzer Prize for stories it jointly published with the New York Times Magazine on how overstressed staff at a New Orleans hospital reacted in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

"I think newspapers are transforming, and becoming news organizations in the most true sense of the term," Fields said, noting many newspapers now integrate audio, video and blogs on their Web sites.

And she said established newspapers will be able to leverage their long-standing credibility when they find new ways to become profitable.

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