

Mass Comm to discuss ethics

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Posted: 2/15/07

As part of Ethics Week, the College of Mass Communications is hosting a panel discussion today from 3:30 p.m. to 5 p.m. in the Allen Theatre to address ethical issues journalists face.

Robert Wernsman, a Texas Tech journalism professor and former newspaper owner, publisher, editor and reporter, will be moderating the discussion.

"I'm steering the ship, but the panelists are the ones who are going to be expressing their opinions," Wernsman said. "My real hope is that we're not going to just hear people of this professional caliber complaining and whining. We need to understand why it is this way. If we can understand why, perhaps someday the students who are in that audience will be able to force change and produce responsible journalism."

The panel will consist of four media professionals: Phil Record, a former Fort Worth Star-Telegram associate-executive editor; Terri Burke, editor of the Abilene Reporter-News; Abner Euresi, anchorman and managing editor at KCBD-TV; and Pete Brewton, a Tech journalism professor, lawyer and former reporter for the Houston Chronicle and the Houston Post.

"I hope we talk about anonymous sources," Brewton said. "The pros and cons and use of anonymous sources, the protection of anonymous sources, and reporters divulging sources. I find that very interesting."

Burke said she hopes to talk about the media's involvement in a community.

"My outlook is different today on that issue," Burke said. "Previously, I didn't do a lot. I thought that to do that would affect my ability to cover the community. I was reluctant for that reason. But now it's different. It's more challenging, but I know the community better because I've been out there more."

As the only lawyer on the panel, Brewton said he may talk about things media lawyers do and do not deal with in today's media.

"Media lawyers mostly deal in employment laws now," Brewton said. "Things like libel and privacy issues, we don't deal with a lot. Open records, either. News organizations rarely go to the mat anymore, and by that I mean filing lawsuits. News organizations are reluctant to sue the government for open records. It's unfortunate, because that might make journalism better. But you know, lawyers shouldn't have to tell journalists how to be ethical."

Wernsman, who teaches Principles of Journalism in the College of Mass Communications, said he thinks the panel discussion will be a valuable learning experience for his students.

"I'm willing to bet that they are going to have verified for them many theories that we discuss in Principles," Wernsman said. "But, verified by the people who are doing it, who are involved."

As a Tech graduate, Euresti said he is glad his alma mater is doing so much to prepare journalism students for their future professions.

"I appreciate that the organizers are bringing in people in the business to give students their point of view," Euresti said. "The professors and teachers have experience, but this is our job, we do this every day. Learning about journalism is one thing, hearing about the practical application is another."

At the panel discussion, a certain amount of time will be set aside for questions from the audience.

"I'll be interested to see what the students are interested in," Brewton said. "If they've got tough questions to ask journalism professionals, this is the chance."

Burke said she would like to be asked the tough questions.

"I think a good lively discussion benefits everybody," Burke said. "That's the joy of journalism, having debates. I hope the students challenge me, and I hope I challenge them."

The College of Mass Communications is planning to produce a DVD of the event. Wernsman said he hopes to get good questions for the panelists, and he expects to have a good discussion.

"With the four people we have, I hope we have the best ethics panel discussion on this campus," Wernsman said. "And if we don't, the others are pretty darn good."