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Abstract

After hooded terrorists ruthlessly beheaded The Wall Street Journal correspondent Daniel Pearl in Pakistan in 2002, there was only one thing on the mind of his Washington bureau colleague Asra Nomani: How to finish the story for which Pearl had paid with his life and how to find and bring his killers to justice. Pearl had gone to Pakistan to follow up on a story that ran earlier in another U.S. daily, The Boston Globe, that claimed the facilitator of the “shoe bomber” Richard Reid was in Pakistan. British-born Reid is serving a life sentence without parole in a U.S. jail on terrorism charges after he tried to detonate explosives in his shoe to bring down a trans Atlantic flight. But Nomani had a problem; you might say a mighty problem: She was going to do this as an independent project, not connected with the Journal. She needed money; she needed a home for the project; and, equally important, she needed help to carry out a gigantic investigation.

Using the Pearl Project to Develop Investigative Reporters

By Peyman Pejman | peymanpejman@hotmail.com

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Georgetown University Provides a Solution

It took her years, but she found her savior in Barbara Feinman Todd, director of the journalism program, part of the English department, at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. Using up-to-three-credits elective courses - in which both undergraduate and graduate level students could participate - Feinman Todd essentially gave Nomani a 32-member reporting team for two semesters in the fall of 2007 and spring 2008. Even though the classes were elective, those wishing to sign up had to write an essay explaining their interest and demonstrating their writing skills. “We had to have professional standards for the work they did because we always wanted to publish on a large scale,” said Feinman Todd.

She and Nomani said they realized that in the beginning their motives might have been different but as time passed their goals coalesced into one. “I would say, for Asra it was a personal project and for me [it was] establishing an academic process and a methodology for it. This was at a time that investigative reporting had come under fire because of all the “pink slips” and buyouts and by doing this we wanted to make a contribution to sustaining the practice of investigative journalism. I would say in time we shared the same goal,” said Feinman Todd. “We wanted to solve the case and also finish Danny’s work.”

Pearl Project Findings

The findings of the three-year Pearl Project investigation, *The Truth Left Behind: Inside the Kidnapping and Murder of Daniel Pearl*, are published separately in this issue and the full report can be found at http://treesaver.publicintegrity.org/Daniel_Pearl.

The Pearl Project raises important questions: Should journalism students get involved in high-profile investigative projects, or should they have more manageable goals? What should be the relationship between mainstream media - who ordinarily carry out such projects - and university projects run by (mostly) amateur students? Do such projects help gain respect for journalism programs? Do they help attract more students to journalism? Will those students actually have a future in today’s environment of dying newspapers and slashed operating budgets? Will such university projects encourage media to absolve themselves of what is rightly their responsibility? Would such projects even work in countries with much less press freedom, less interest by students in journalism (as opposed to other communication subjects such as public relations or

advertising), or less robust commitments to principles equivalent to the First Amendment rights in the United States?

There may not be clear answers to many of these questions. What is clear is that the Pearl Project shows that journalism education - and even student enthusiasm - is still alive and, despite the seeming downtrend in mainstream media, universities - at least some - are even increasing their attention to journalism.

PR for Journalism Programs

Kathy Temple, chair of the English Department at Georgetown University which oversees journalism courses, says the Pearl Project has advanced the stature of the journalism program within the university, one of the best known and most respected in the country. "I can say that the Pearl Project has boosted interest in journalism at Georgetown. We're currently working on an expansion of the program and will be proposing a minor to the administration in the next few months," she said in response to an email question.

Just as in the real world, where journalists copy from each other, journalism schools, too, look to each other for ideas. Steve Fox, sports and multimedia journalism director at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, said he modeled his student investigative courses - which began in January 2010 - after the class taught by Feinman Todd and Nomani. "When I was thinking about crafting my course, the Pearl Project came up in the Google search so I tracked down Barbara and Asra, and they were tremendously helpful and willing to share anything," said Fox.

He said the undergraduate students in his class - usually around 13 - are in their senior year and take the course as an elective because "by then they are far into it and are looking seriously at journalism as a career ... so the value of the class is that they get to apply skills that they learn in other classes." The final product in his classes usually is blogs or articles in local newspapers. Unlike Georgetown, Amherst has a full-fledged communication department with about 400 students enrolled.

Can Student Projects Save Investigative Journalism?

Others believe that while the growth of journalism schools and programs has been inevitable, the kind of investigative work they might produce in the future may be a far cry from the kind of report that the Georgetown classes produced. "The worst carnage to journalism [in recent times] has happened in the past 2-3 years [when] some 20,000 journalists lost their jobs ... [Meanwhile] Foundations have contributed some \$150 million-\$200 million to universities since 2005," says Charles Lewis, professor and executive director of the Investigative Reporting Workshop at the American University's School of Communication in Washington, D.C. "When there is money and [unemployed] people with distinguished backgrounds and a perceived need in the society - in this case, better journalism - it is no surprise that we have 14 university-based investigative journalism centers," he adds.

But money is a double-edged sword for universities and foundations. Lewis and others interviewed for this article cautioned that many universities have been and will be cautious about embarking on "sensitive" projects for which they could be sued for libel, or those involved targeted for retribution. While most universities carry libel insurance, that usually applies to scholarly publications and not investigative journalism.

Newspapers, too, might be cautious about carrying out certain investigations. In fact, there are suggestions that The Wall Street Journal itself shied away from doing its own version of the Pearl Project out of concern for the safety and security of its reporters worldwide, as well as for possible financial repercussions. I contacted Gerald Seib, currently the Washington bureau chief

of the Journal, by email and confirmed that Seib received the questions; however, he did not respond to questions about why the Journal did not carry out its own full-fledged reporting on the Pearl murder or why it did not partner with Georgetown University - financially or otherwise.

Problems on the Horizon

“Investigative journalism is a relatively new phenomenon, and I know universities have started hearing from their powerful and wealthy backers about the possible reverberations of doing [sensitive] investigative projects. I don’t think they are going to close down university investigative projects, but I think they will produce different types of products,” says Lewis. “I don’t think even Georgetown University would have or could have published the Pearl Project without outside help.”

Lewis is also the founder of the Center for Public Integrity, which, according to its web site, “is dedicated to producing original investigative journalism about significant public issues to make institutional power more transparent and accountable.” He made his comments for this article in his capacity as executive director of the investigative workshop at the American University.

Nomani believes journalism schools are vital to finishing many hard-hitting projects - like hers - that mainstream media cannot tackle any more. Without support from Georgetown University, she said, “It would [have been] impossible to find the kind of long term support [the project needed]. I was waiting for five years to find a ‘home’ for this kind of investigation and to have 32 incredible reporters ... with their sharp agile minds, I could not try to comprehend some of their detailed spreadsheet and schematic work.”

Agile minds they might have had, but good support they also received. While Nomani is an accomplished journalist, Feinman Todd brought a wealth of investigative reporting experience, having been a research assistant for one of Watergate-star Bob Woodward’s books and a ghostwriter, researcher, or editor on a number of other books, including those penned by Hillary Rodham Clinton and former U.S. Senator Bob Kerrey.

How the Students Did It

Feinman Todd and Nomani said they conducted the elective classes as virtual newsrooms, though there were occasional formal classes with guest speakers on topics such as basic reporting and writing, ethics in journalism, and following the Associated Press stylebook. The instructors divided the pupils into mixed groups of undergraduate and graduate students who volunteered for beats such as media issues, human rights, Pakistani intelligence services, Pakistani police, Pakistani judicial system, forensics, Federal Bureau of Investigation, or the U.S. Department of State. Students worked collaboratively, using a wiki system and an analytical software platform provided by Palantir Technologies.

All reporting was done from the United States - the students did not travel to Pakistan – and initially relied heavily on sources and knowledge that Nomani provided from her own reporting experience in Southeast Asia. As time went by, students either developed their own sources or continued interacting with the ones Nomani had recommended. By the end of the second semester, Nomani said, the students had created a spreadsheet of all suspects and players in the Pearl murder, mapped out the family and tribal connections, and established a detailed timeline for what happened when. “I would say about 80 percent of the reporting was done,” she added.

Feinman Todd said while she could have dedicated more students and semester hours to the project, “I kind of made the decision that we should move forward with finishing the investigation.” But that was not the end of the story for the Pearl Project, or the personal and

professional ambitions of Feinman Todd and Nomani. There were still holes in the story, and they still had to write the full report, but, again, they needed staff and money. Connections, persuasion, and salesmanship landed them \$362,000 from the Center for Public Integrity Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation and the Fund for Investigative Journalism.

Professionals Finished the Pearl Project

Once the classroom part of the project was completed, Feinman Todd and Nomani moved the project to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists at the Center for Public Integrity, continued interviewing sources in Pakistan and the United States, flew some sources from Pakistan to the United States, filed numerous Freedom of Information Action requests to force the U.S. government into releasing thousands of pages of documents, and hired professional editors to cut down the 70,000-word manuscript into a more manageable 30,000-word final project, which was officially released in January 2011.

So, what worked and what did not? “I think we learned how to conduct an investigation that was [geographically] far away and do it with a big team and members who had varying degrees of skills and experiences. We learned how to be organized and how to use technology to get organized,” said Feinman Todd. “In terms of what didn’t work, I think it was tough that we had students of all different experience levels in journalism. It was really a hodgepodge of different experiences. It was a challenge because everyone had to pull their weight, and some people were just learning while others were professionals.”

It was also challenging because, after all, this was a university project, not run by professional journalists whose primary job would have been to work on the project. “These were students. Some grad students who had families and work and then there were undergrads who were younger and did not have those obligations but had four other classes and college life that they wanted to live,” said Feinman Todd.

“It was trial and error to know how much we can expect of the students and how much was fair. We lived and breathed it but was it fair to expect that much of them? We ended up doing a lot of modulating how much to assign.”