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USC Annenberg students and Center for Investigative Reporting explore Iraq war's local impact

New Model Developed for Collaborative, Multimedia Journalism

LOS ANGELES, March 9, 2009 – Exploring a new model to increase investigative reporting coverage in the United States, the **USC Annenberg School for Communication** and the **Center for Investigative Reporting** have launched a partnership to produce an online multimedia project about the Iraq war's impact on Southern California.

“Baghdad | Los Angeles” (baghdadla.uscannenberg.org), a four-month collaboration led by journalism professor **Sandy Tolan** and created by eight journalism students, examines topics such as military recruiting controversies, the challenges of Iraqi Americans living separate lives in both countries, and a “biography” of a locally built F-18 fighter jet from production to deployment in Iraq. The print, broadcast and radio pieces weave together to form an interpretive and analytical package that examines the untold stories of the war. Center for Investigative Reporting executive director **Robert Rosenthal** and editorial director **Mark Schapiro** advised the team of five graduate and three undergraduate journalism students on story leads, accuracy, fairness and quality.

“This model of collaboration with USC is one we want to emulate throughout California and even nationally,” Rosenthal said. “It worked really well from our point of view. When you see the stories and the work that came out of this class, it’s impressive. We’re building a model that’s based on collaboration with universities and organizations.”

Rosenthal said newspapers previously had resources to create large teams around major investigative projects.

“Those days are gone,” he said. “I believe the new model will have its strength in thinking differently and having organizations meld their strengths.”

Geneva Overholser, director of USC Annenberg’s School of Journalism, said the Baghdad | Los Angeles project illustrates ways in which schools and non-profits can work together.

“This rich and valuable journalism shows beautifully the kind of contribution that journalism schools can make in this time of unsettlement among news organizations,” Overholser said. “Capable and talented journalism students, working with dedicated editors, can meet substantial public information needs.”

Tolan said the opportunity for students to work with industry veterans such as Rosenthal and Schapiro, who each have decades of award-winning reporting and editing experience, is invaluable as students begin their professional careers. The students worked as investigative journalists for skilled editors to produce hidden stories in the second-largest media market in the country.

The five graduate students – all scheduled to graduate in 2009 – are **Chris Nelson** (studying print journalism), **Michelle Lanz** (print journalism), **Daniela Gerson** (specialized journalism), **Jean Yung** (print journalism) and **Lara Coger** (public diplomacy). The undergraduate students – all majoring in print journalism and scheduled to graduate in 2009 – are **Janna Brancolini**, **Alexander Herbach** and **Catherine Lyons**.

“At the core of the series was an attempt to see how the Iraq war was affecting different people and lives in Southern California for better or worse,” Tolan said. “The point was to really get into the human aspect of how the war has affected people. They accomplished that.”

Schapiro said the series is composed of individual stories that did not need the classic element of investigative journalism that uncovers a lawbreaker or scandal.

“The power of this package comes from the accumulated portrait it provides, revealing aspects of the war that have been grossly underreported – if reported at all,” Schapiro said. “Baghdad | Los Angeles provides an explanatory and revelatory picture of the consequences of the war that few have bothered to report.”

Other stories are about a once-exiled Iraqi man now able to return to his home country; an illegal immigrant raised in the United States fighting to join the U.S. military; an Iraqi man who fled Iraq 32 years ago as a child to escape Saddam Hussein’s rule; a student who grew up in the shadow of the defense industry; and a local Junior ROTC program that could either be considered an inner-city opportunity or a flow of fresh recruits for a military struggling with numbers.

“I had doubts at the beginning about how one would find an original way to explore the ways in which the war in Iraq has specifically impacted Southern California,” Schapiro said. “But I was impressed by the variety of ways students answered the larger question. It’s rare in journalism to have a group of people who can be organized to go after an overall subject in a coordinated fashion. The students used those critical qualities of journalists everywhere — curiosity and skepticism — to follow the trails and demonstrate that original stories were out there.”

Rosenthal said he loved working with the USC Annenberg students because of their enthusiasm and fresh ideas, and because he could help mold the next generation of investigative journalists.

“I could literally see that light bulb going on when I suggested something they hadn’t thought of,” Rosenthal said. “I have a lot of experience. Being able to share it on any level and hopefully teaching something of value is a great feeling. I strongly believe that even with all the problems in the media that the future value of high quality journalism and investigative reporting in a

multimedia world will be even more important. There's a future in journalism for these and other students."

The students said the hard work and many hours they put into the project went far beyond obtaining a good grade. After all, the class was only worth two units and the vast majority of USC classes are four units.

"The project demonstrated the important thing is to learn how to report and think critically," said Brancolini, who along with Nelson produced a package about the F-18 Super Hornet. "We picked up more and more multimedia skills along the way through workshops and each other."

Herbach, who analyzed the Army's new \$1.35 billion advertising campaign, said having the Center for Investigative Reporting partnership combined the best of the academic and "real" worlds.

"For the first time in my journalism career, I had that level of focus on top of the amazing editors I was able to work with," Herbach said. "To have three professional editors focusing on my work – and working on a project as important as this – provided a really special learning environment."

Lyons, who wrote a profile of a once-exiled Iraqi man named Basam Ridha, said she received some of the best editing and feedback of her life.

"Sandy, Mark and Rosey (Rosenthal) looked at my piece objectively and gave really excellent suggestions about how to make my piece better and how to make it flow," Lyons said. "They really helped us figure out what would work and what would not."

Yung said she worked as hard as she did on her video about Hollywood High School Junior ROTC recruits because she felt she owed it to her subjects to make a high-quality, accurate piece. She said working with her editors was important because they would always look at the big picture.

"Working with them was cool because they gave a high-up perspective," Yung said. "We'd get mired down with the details, and they were much more about the big picture. Some things I didn't even consider explaining ended up being important, but I didn't think about it because I was already so involved with the story."

Rosenthal said the Center for Investigative Reporting would like to continue its relationship with USC Annenberg, and further test its model of collaboration

"This is a model we want to continue," he said. "Combining experienced journalists with students who understand multimedia and are pushed to high-quality work is a great partnership. It's something we want and something we will definitely continue."

Tolan agreed.

“We at Annenberg are really looking forward to future collaborations with CIR,” Tolan said. “In part to complement the existing investigative reporting classes at Annenberg, but also – in light of the downsizing in much of the news industry – to help build capacity for more investigative reporting within the school and throughout California.”

About the USC Annenberg School for Communication

Located in Los Angeles at the University of Southern California, the USC Annenberg School for Communication (annenberg.usc.edu) is among the nation's leading institutions devoted to the study of journalism and communication, and their impact on politics, culture and society. With an enrollment of more than 1,900 graduate and undergraduate students, USC Annenberg offers degree programs in journalism, communication, public diplomacy and public relations.

About the Center for Investigative Reporting

Founded in 1977, the Center for Investigative Reporting (<http://centerforinvestigativereporting.org/>), based in Berkeley, is the nation's oldest nonprofit investigative reporting organization. It collaborates with news organizations and universities to produce investigative stories for all media. CIR has won numerous awards for print, television, radio and web reporting.

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