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03/04/2013
March 4, 2013

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March 3rd, 2013 Posted in News

By Katie Swain

LOGAN—CNN Digital reporter Jessica Ravitz has focused her career on long-form, in-depth storytelling in a day that is increasingly more consumed by 140-character tweets, sound bites and abbreviated news.

She returned to Utah Wednesday to share the story of her ongoing journey and success in a Morris Media & Society Lecture, “Persistence, Patience and Compassion: An Enterprise Journalist’s Toolbox.”

“I think we are led to believe attention spans are at an all-time low,” Ravitz said, “but I think if people are brought into a good story they’ll stick with it.”

USU journalism professor Matthew LaPlante, who worked with Ravitz when they both reported for The Salt Lake Tribune, defined enterprise journalism as “news that doesn’t come from a press release or other news event, but by the instincts and persistence and hard work of journalists.”

Ravitz says readers and citizens still want more depth than just headline news.

“I’m here to argue today that the appetite for enterprise stories is still alive and well, and hopefully always will be,” she said. “Because at the end of the day people still need reporters and writers and people who can share information.

“Now this doesn’t mean that stories we put our hearts and souls into aren’t sometimes eclipsed by, say sideboobs or something like that.”

Ravitz illustrated this point with one of her own stories—an experience she had at CNN Digital.

“On the same day that I decided to write about and publish about Holocaust rape, Kim Kardashian decided to get her butt X-rayed to prove that it was real,” she said. “And my story just got buried. That’s just one of the icky realities of journalism today. The good news is that in the end my story was read by more than 6 million people, so even Kim Kardashian’s butt couldn’t get completely in the way of that.”

LaPlante is grateful that there are still journalists doing long-form stories on serious issues. “Jessica quite simply is one of the best enterprise journalists in the nation,” he said.

Baraheen Ashrafi lost her husband, Mohammed Saladuddin Chowdury, in the 9/11 attacks. Jessica Ravitz told her family’s story on CNN.com 10 years later. Photo courtesy of CNN.com

Ravitz has chosen to write on a variety of women’s issues and religion all over the world, giving a voice to Holocaust rape victims, a Muslim family’s loss on 9/11, an Afghan teenager who escaped her Taliban husband at the expense of her nose and ears, and many others.

Reporting on topics of such sensitivity requires compassion without sacrificing truth, Ravitz said.
When she was writing the story of Aesha Mohammadzai, the Afghani woman who was disfigured by the Taliban, she worked for over a year before even being able to speak with Aesha. Her perseverance and obvious compassion for those involved was finally what enabled her to gain access to the story.

“The work Jessica does is the kind of journalism that really excites me,” said USU journalism senior Kelton Wells. “She writes stories that really dig into unknown territory and give voices to those that don’t have one.”

Journalism professor emerita Nancy Williams, who teaches the public affairs reporting class, said she was impressed with Ravitz for the balance she had achieved of remaining emotionally uninvolved and still being compassionate and really listening.

“Jessica is marvelous because she stressed the need for journalists to be compassionate,” Williams said. “That’s something everyone needs to learn.”

The work can be emotionally exhausting, Ravitz acknowledges.

“I do this because I want to give voice to the voiceless,” she said. “I want to challenge readers to look at the world differently. I want to open their eyes to new perspectives and I want to shine the light on individuals and stories that matter, or at least should matter.”