

Kevin Merida: Thank you, Yvonne and thank the Eisenhower Foundation for putting on this forum, is great. I will try to be as brief, because I'm actually interested in this discussion. I caught a little bit of it before this panel. You know, just to restate the question, the first one. Why has the quantity and quality of media coverage on poverty, inequality, and race declined since the Kerner Commission in late 1960s?

You know, I think that one of the biggest things that I've noticed in being in this business, I guess now for 27 years as a full-time journalist, is just the gradual shift in our industry, which is the same technological shift we've seen in other industries. You know, the newspaper that I work in now is not like the newspaper I began in, I mean, and I think that's the same everywhere. The way in which we do our work, I mean, it's, you know, there's a lot, you know, everybody has cell phones, Blackberries, the sophistication now in reporting, databases, anything you want to track, I mean, you know, you go cover something, in minutes, you know, if there's a catastrophe, by the time you get to the airport you can have, I mean, you know, the addresses of everybody, the killer's sister, the, I mean, nine people who were on this particular strip because there, you can track down everybody and you create databases and it's changed really the culture of newsrooms.

I mean, particularly the bigger newsrooms, the more you see people chained to their desk, there's a different kind of attitude about reporting. I mean projects are planned out around cubicles and their meetings there are constructive. I mean, and our work often reads that way, I mean, you can see the architecture of it when you read a story. Sometimes I can look at a story in a paper and I know exactly how it was constructed. And so, I say this to say that when I started, and I think this true for reporters of the era of the Kerner Commission, certainly, and all the way up through the seventies and eighties and less so in the nineties.

There was a lot more, what we used to call shoe leather reporting, a lot more knocking on doors, a lot more engaging the public, a lot more discovery. I mean, honest discovery not stories by supposition and premise, but really organic journalism, I mean, the kind where reporters are actually out in a neighborhood someplace and they find something and they come back and they used to be a friend of mine and wow, I'm blanking on his name now, which I apologize. He won a Pulitzer Prize. His first name's Dennis. He used to say, you know, I used to go out and what my job was I'd be out someplace and I'd come back to the newsroom and I'd try to get the tigers in the newspaper. I mean, the editors would be looking for some little mouse and I'd come back and boom, you dump something on the desk. This is what I found. Put that in the newspaper.

And it's rare that you're going to find that now. I mean, the stories, you know, there are budget meetings all day long. They're scripting those stories out early and that's not to say that there's not great work done in the process and so I don't want this to be a sour note, but it's really, it speaks to some very important fundamental in the shift in which journalism has taken. And there's good in that because you can now document whole-scale failure, you know, in a way that you couldn't, whether it's through the Abramoff Scandal, you can really put some serious statistical analysis to stuff in a way that we couldn't do when I first came up.

But the bad part about it is, is it's created a certain distance that shows in our stories and of course when you have the distance, the distance is greater and greater with the people who are less educated and less well off economically and that's our disconnect. It's the same gap between the have and have-nots that exist in this country exists in this institution. And it's really sad, sad to me, but, and so, I think that, it reminds me, you know, we've got a lot of, we've got both kudos and brick-bracks, you know, for coverage of Katrina. There was some terrific coverage of Katrina, I want to say that, and there was some terrible coverage. I mean, and it really kind of points out something. It was, you know, at the very beginning, you know, when there was an embrace of the term refugees until people started to call in on it and you saw that kind of slip away and that's part of that distance. And it's almost like that show the, *Lost*, I mean, if you, which is a great TV show. I don't know if you all watch it. And there's these people on the island that are, they called *The Others* and it often reminds me of people of color -- particularly the lowest economic, people in the lowest economic rung -- they're kind of like the others to us. I mean, most people in newsrooms are well educated and well off economically and, you know, stories that are uncomfortable for journalists are harder to deal with.

You saw that, Barbara mentioned some of what she discovered in the Commission of Katrina, you could see that happening when stories were unfolding because you would see the level of second-hand reporting that got in the papers. I mean, you know, not stuff that people saw and I know in one of the meetings I had said, You know, I mean, if we're going to write about looters and people loot, show me looters, talk to some looters, you know. You've got to have reporters going out and talking to everybody. We've got to talk to criminals, we've got to talk to looters, you've got to talk to everybody and there can't be, there's an awful lot of second and third-hand reporting when it comes to people who are poor, particularly people that are involved in criminal activity, people in tough neighborhoods, you know, some of, a lot of the crime reporting is from a distance. It's from official sources and, you know, what you want to do is people to go, you know, transplant themselves in a neighborhood where crime is happening, to see that happening and that's the kind of reporting that is authentic. And I think a lot more of it used to go on, I mean, you know, *Ellis* knows this and I'm sure Barbara knows. I mean, people used to spend, you know, time in housing projects and actually would camp out there, you know. People spent, you know, real time so that you got the humanity of people and that's what's missing. And if we can kind of connect everybody to each other then that would improve, go a long way to improving what we do.

There's a couple of other quick points, you know. Certainly others have made this point about not enough diversity in the reporting and editing ranks and that's certainly true. I just echo that and I don't mean diversity solely by race and ethnicity, but by experience, by class, by education because you can be black and Latino and that doesn't necessarily mean anything. I'm just here to tell you, I mean, it's got to be more than that.

I mean, some of the great reporting done back in the Sixties was done by white journalists and that's true, so it's not solely by, it's also by interest. I mean, you've got to have people willing and wanting to do the kind of stories. In the newsroom, part of the culture is that the beats that were relegated, the old beats of race and poverty either don't exist anymore in most newsroom or they have been marginalized and it's very hard to, they have not, they don't have the kind of sponsorship that would elevate those stories to

priority. There's also been, certainly, that the subjects of equality, inequality, race, poverty, et cetera, you know, are not on the front burners for governmental institutions like Congress and the Executive Branch and other prominent political figures.

Quickly to wrap up, what can we do to reverse this media decline? You know, I think that one thing that we can do, and I could say for the Eisenhower Foundation, is to pitch more stories for this sophisticated era, to kind of connect, show the relationship between, you know, poverty, inequality, race to other subjects in the way that a very good television show, HBOs, *The Wire*, which concluded season does with the kids and education. They show how all of that kind of works together. Poverty connects to schools, the failing schools, not having people in the home has consequences, et cetera. I've got my message to wrap up so I'm going to knock it off here Yvonne and hopefully we can get, I can come back with a couple other points.