

Public craves news, former editor says



Quinn

Newsman gives journalists advice

By Kristine Long
Staff Reporter

The former editor in chief of USA Today said Thursday afternoon that the public's appetite for news and information never was satisfied.

John Collins Quinn said the USA public wanted all the news it could get — "when it wants it, where it wants it, how it wants it and it is willing to pay the price to get it."

"(The public) wants the bad and the sad news along with the good and the glad. It wants to enjoy the best of the news, and it wants to learn how to cope with the rest of it."

Quinn, deputy chairman of The Freedom Forum, spoke about his

experiences in the newspaper business to about 200 people in Avery Hall. The Freedom Forum is a financially independent, nonpartisan, international organization dedicated to free press, free speech and free spirit for all people.

His Copple/Hearst lecture was titled, "The Press Has Nothing to Fear But The Press Itself."

The public, Quinn said, knows how to "mix and match" the media to fit its lifestyle.

Although it may seem that the public is angry at the media, he said, that is not the case. Instead, the public is fed up with journalists who are rude and abrasive.

Quinn's journalistic experience stretches back to 1943 when he started as a copy boy at the Providence (R.I.) Journal-Bulletin. He worked his way up to the top, and when USA Today was founded in 1982, he was its lead

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Quinn, deputy chairman of The Freedom Forum

planning editor.

Thursday he shared his experiences through a series of lessons offered to help journalists improve their craft.

The public needs "all the thorough reporting, thorough questioning and aggressive digging that the media can deliver," he said.

But the public does not need journalists who are rude and arrogant, Quinn said.

As journalists, he said, "we still

must do what we have to do, but we must pay attention to how we do it."

Quinn said that in the fast world of changing technology, journalists must remember their main responsibility: informing the public.

Journalists in all areas — print, television and advertising — must come together to get "all the facts our audience deserves and needs as this complicated world requires today," he said.

Former editor agrees with Ashe coverage

By Sean Green
Senior Reporter

USA Today editors made the right decision when they pursued a story that tennis great Arthur Ashe had AIDS, the newspaper's former editor in chief said Thursday.

John Collins Quinn, who was on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln campus Thursday to deliver a speech, said that although he did not want to second-guess USA Today's decision to pursue the story, he thought it was the right thing to do.

On Wednesday, Ashe, 48, acknowledged that he has had AIDS since 1988 and that he became infected with the virus five years ago from a blood transfusion, according to the Associated Press.

Ashe disclosed his condition after a reporter from USA Today called him Tuesday. He said someone called the newspaper and told them about

Quinn says USA Today made good news call

his condition, forcing the newspaper to decide whether to pursue the story.

Although Ashe had been trying to keep his condition from the public, Quinn said USA Today was right to pursue the story.

"I'm a firm believer that the best judge of a news call is the editor handling the story at the time," he said. "I think it's the kind of call that a good editor must make, in terms of his news readership."

Ashe is a key figure to USA Today readers, Quinn said, and the public spotlight on private concerns goes with the territory.

"In our free society, a public figure has to expect that his private concerns will wind up in the public

sector," he said. "It's a tough issue, and it's terrible to have one's own grief displayed in public."

Quinn described Ashe's condition as a tragedy waiting to happen and said the story would have come out eventually.

However, he said, the publicity surrounding Ashe's contraction of the virus may be portrayed in a less sensational manner because it was handled well.

"There were two very statesman-like decisions made when this rumor surfaced," he said. "(Gene) Policinski was not reckless and waited until he had the whole story, and Ashe went public right away and didn't stone-wall."

Policinski is managing editor for

sports at USA Today.

Because the story was handled well and probably will not be sensationalized, Quinn said, it offers an alternative to the kind of sensationalism that some members of the media have used covering other stories.

"I think the coverage of this story and the Magic Johnson story is the flip side of the way (Mike) Tyson's and (William) Kennedy's stories were covered," he said.

One reason Ashe gave for not going public was to prevent his wife and five-year-old daughter from problems that might have arisen if he went public with his condition.

Quinn said the probability that Ashe's family would be put in the media spotlight was unfortunate, but

should not have changed the editor's decision.

"It is important to be sympathetic," he said. "But without being hard-hearted, you have to ride with both the triumphs and tragedies."

"You can't just report the good things."

Quinn said Ashe's announcement renewed criticism that the press was telling too many indelicate things.

"If the press sets itself up as the ambassador of social niceness, the news doesn't mean anything," he said. "You can't keep secrets. Once you start down that road, it never ends."

Quinn also said he agreed with USA Today's decision to let readers know why they made the decision to follow the Ashe story.

"I would have clearly explained the decision to the readers and told them what elements were involved in making it, just as USA Today did this morning," he said.

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