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Lecture honors Daniel Pearl

CNN Correspondent recalls legacy of journalist and alum

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In a lecture notable for its candor and critical edge, CNN Chief International Correspondent Christiane Amanpour offered a forceful defense of journalism last night at Kresge Auditorium.



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"I believe strongly that in this uncertain world our profession has a particular and important role and a particular and important place in our societies and our democracies," Amanpour said. "Without robust journalists, we as a society are weaker because we can't tell the stories that we absolutely must be able to tell."

Amanpour was the keynote speaker for the inaugural Daniel Pearl Memorial Lecture, a program sponsored by the Office of the President, the Office for Religious Life, the Center for Jewish Life, the Daniel Pearl Foundation and the ASSU Speakers Bureau. Pearl, a 1985 Stanford graduate and a reporter for The Wall Street Journal, was kidnapped and killed by a Pakistani militant group in 2002. This year's lecture was the first in what is to become an annual lecture series honoring Pearl's dedication to the improvement of the human condition through journalism, music and innovative communication.

The lecture is part of a series of Pearl commemorations. Last week featured the premiere of the HBO documentary "The Journalist and the Jihadi: The Murder of Daniel Pearl," and the recognition of October 6-15 as the Daniel Pearl World Music Days.

Prior to Amanpour's address, Pearl's former classmate Howard Kaplan introduced Ruth and Judea Pearl, who each honored their son and thanked Amanpour for coming to Stanford.

“By honoring Danny, she honors a community of dedicated reporters who risk their lives so we can see reality from a different and new prism of truth and on a new level of understanding,” Judea Pearl said. “[Amanpour] honors the culture of modernity and open-mindedness that this university symbolizes, from which Danny absorbed his curiosity and love of humanity.”

“People like Christiane keep us going and keep us from the temptation of retirement,” deadpanned Ruth Pearl. “We are grateful to Stanford for honoring our son in so many ways.” Amanpour, in turn, thanked the Pearls for providing a source of inspiration.

“The Pearl family has heroically tried, and succeeded, in trying to turn the violence in that period of hatred into something that is optimistic, hopeful, and something that can bring understanding and promote tolerance,” she said. “I am so glad to be here today, and I’m really pleased that you’ve organized this annual lecture, and very proud to be the first one to be able to do it.”

Speaking without notes to a standing-room-only audience, Amanpour offered insights, not only from her experience as a prolific foreign correspondent, but also as a critic of her own industry and a first-hand observer of world conflicts. Her subject matter ranged from diminishing international support for the War on Terror to her view that journalism has become too heavily beholden to profits and, consequently, too trivial.

“The age that we are in right now is the age of serious, but what we are given is about the most banal and frivolous diet you can imagine,” she said. “I don’t know where it’s coming from, or why the networks are peddling this kind of frivolity when we desperately need to get to the bottom of these matters.

According to Amanpour, the most important stories going untold

are those that inform the American public about the culture clash that dominates the international arena — stories that convey facts that are not manipulated for political utility.

“I’ve seen wholesale cuts in foreign bureaus, wholesale retreat from foreign news coverage,” she said. “It could not come at a worse time, with the world so tense, with policy being so heavily politicized that it is so difficult even to figure out where is the truth.”

Amanpour did not shy away from a stern appraisal of the American political establishment. The strongest criticism she extended was the failure of the United States government to take advantage of the international coalition that formed after the September 11 attacks, or of the high regard in which members of the international community hold the U.S.

“[After September 11], people in the most unlikely corners of the world and in the most unlikely countries lit candles, said prayers and sent support,” she said. “It is truly heartbreaking to go around the world and see that, by and large, that coalition of cooperation, genuine shock and outrage doesn’t exist anymore. Something happened in the last five years that has turned the world against this great country whose values are the best in the world — whose democracy, whose economy, whose morals, whose education are sought in every corner of the world — and that’s not an exaggeration, even in countries where you might think people are hostile to the U.S. Something has gone wrong.”

Amanpour, however, did not blame the war in Iraq for the failure of the international coalition in the War on Terror. Rather, she argued, it was the lack of a coalition-presence in the rebuilding process, along with the US government’s reluctance to face reports of civil disorder in Iraq, that sapped foreign support and decreased the United States’ credibility.

“I was there when Baghdad fell, and people were happy, people

wanted to make this future work. But they were never given a chance,” she said. “When we reported looting, we were told that journalists were exaggerating. When we reported that there was a major insurgency growing, we were told that we were too pessimistic.”

“Five years later, [members of the insurgency] are killing Americans, and killing the American dream, and killing the dreams of people in that whole part of the world.”

Amanpour also noted the failure of the U.S. to act with appropriate moral rigor.

“It is unbelievable that in this country we are having debates about torture and secret prisons,” she said. “Things like Abu Gharaib and Guantanamo Bay have deeply affected the moral authority of this country and have deeply compromised it.”

Amanpour was not entirely pessimistic. The most important part of Middle Eastern policy, she argued, is to engage the numerous foreign citizens attracted to the opportunities and philosophy of the United States.

“Everywhere I go in the world, whether it is Afghanistan or with the Palestinians, people want to come to this country,” she said. “They want to come here to learn about this country, to get the opportunities that you have. These are the people that we need to be pulling back into the fold, and I don’t think it’s very hard to do that. It may take many years, but I don’t think it’s a lost cause. But for the moment there’s such division that’s been created and such an incredible politicization of policy that the way out is a little confused.”

In keeping with “Journalism and the World,” the lecture’s title, Amanpour noted the key role journalists play in facilitating cooperation in the world and conveying to international audiences accurate facts that are independent of political

agendas.

Paraphrasing Samuel Johnson, Amanpour said that journalism “is the last refuge of the rascal.”

“It is our duty to be free and independent,” she emphasized to rapturous applause. “That is what this country’s constitution gave this country’s press — a duty given by no other constitution in the world. Since September 11, there has been a tendency by the powers that be that if stories are reported that don’t fit the political vision, then it’s the reporter’s problem — the reporters are unpatriotic, the reporters are comforting the terrorists.”

“But we have a duty to say no, to say no, because if we don’t say no, and if we don’t expose it and stand up against it, then our whole profession is compromised.”

Amanpour’s optimism was based on her vision that journalists, dedicated to the pursuit of truth, could help remedy the missteps of the status quo.

“I truly believe that this profession still is one of the unique professions in the world,” she said. “We can go out there, we can tell the story, we can be your eyes and ears and we can be an important part of civil society. When we have the resources and we are committed to telling the story fully, I strongly believe that we can make a difference and that we can make a difference for the better.”

“And that is what motivates me and what motivated Danny Pearl,” said Amanpour, drawing her lecture back to the journalist in whose honor she had taken the podium. “Each conflict we cover gets more and more dangerous, yet we become more and more determined to go out and stay there and tell more stories.”

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