

Niraj Warikoo, Imad Hammad, Rana Abbas, Nadia Fadel

Niraj Warikoo Interview

Geri: (00:00:24:00) So in the case if stories such as this bank story that you're covering today, you probably encounter reluctant sources. How do you deal with that?

Niraj: (00:00:34:07) Right. Should I look at you or the camera.

Geri: (00:00:36:20) This side.

Niraj: (00:00:40:20) Yeah, one of the challenges is that it makes your stories that much better if you have actual people named in the story rather than just having anonymous sources. At the same time a lot of people in the Arab American community are going to feel reluctant to speak out because they feel there might be retaliation, the government may come after them, their employer may come after them. So how do we get people to talk? Usually we do it through groups, which is ADC, who have built up trust in the community to I myself may know somebody in the community pretty well and they can be an intermediary for me to tell them, "Look. You can trust this person. We're trying to help your case. But there usually has to be a person in between to help convince that person to speak to that person. And we do have to do it on our own. We have to let them know the ramifications of this and what would happen if you appear in the paper. We had a similar issue that came up earlier with the issue of illegal immigration and we ended up doing a lot of stories on illegal immigrants. And the question is should we put their names in the paper if they're here illegally? Would that make them end up getting deported? But in those cases we kind of cleared it with their attorneys first and they said it would be okay. So there's always these issues that you have to deal with when covering these types of stories.

Geri: (00:01:54:21) So how about if the woman Mr. Hamaad mentioned does not want to talk to you? How are you going to deal with that? Are you still going to run the story?

Niraj: (00:02:03:20) That's a good question. I had been thinking—even before this—of doing a larger story on the issue of banks and the Arab American community. There was a charity that had their bank accounts closed recently—a Muslim charity—that had their banks closed by a bank recently. And I remember thinking, "Hmm, there might be a larger story here." So now with this latest development I think there is a larger issue or there seems to be a trend here. But the thing is, if we could get somebody on the record it would definitely make it a story. If we can't, it's going to make it a bit of challenge. I'm going to talk it over with my colleagues at the paper and see what they say and see if we can do a story without any names. So for right now, it's sort of unclear.

Geri: (00:02:51:00) Mr. Numy had mentioned you were interviewing him that sometimes it's the editor that has a little but more impact on the story. Would you agree with that?

Niraj: (00:03:03:20) Right. No, I see what you're saying. I think Hamad makes a good point that getting a story into a newspaper is a collaborative effort. It's not just one person. It's not like a blog where one person is writing whatever they want, however they want. There has to be a team effort. It's you, your direct editor, it's the metro editor, the copy desk itself has several editors look at your story. And also the bigger play of the story, the more editors are involved. So for example, if your story goes on the front page there's several more editors involved in the story. So like any newspaper, there's a collaborative effort at the *Free Press* to get stuff in the paper. And I think it ends up helping because the more people that are involved, the more credible it becomes. Versus blog where you have one person writing whatever they want.

Geri: (00:03:56:15) We had difficulties finding people who would go on camera who had been harmed by the media. And then you had mentioned one instance where a gentleman was portrayed as a terrorist. And years later I guess he was cleared of the charges but already the damage was done. Could you talk a little bit about that ?

Niraj: (00:04:18:15) Sure. One of the problems with newspapers and other media outlets is that whenever the government announces charges in their community of somebody linked to terrorism. We sometimes hype it up. We put it on the front page. We have their picture in there. We say this person has allegations of ties to Hezbollah or Al Qaeda. So this person's reputation is tarnished. And then it turns out two years later or three years after the court system, they're either guilty of the charges or all the terrorism charges are thrown out. But by then the damage has been done and this person's image has been hurt. There's been other cases related to that. You may remember in Atlanta there was a guy who been alleged to be the bomber—I think it was the '96 Olympics—was completely false. And so we find ourselves in those types of situations. And I do feel bad about that when it happens. When somebody who's innocent gets associated with terrorism, it's something we have to look out for and we have to be careful when we write these stories.

Geri: (00:05:22:25) Now you also meant that you had felt a little restrained by being in the newsroom during the interview. Was there something else you wanted to mention about news media coverage or *The Detroit Free Press's* coverage of the Arab American community?

(*Break in tape*)

Niraj: (00:05:42:06) I think I did it because I was doing this channel four thing a lot. But the option is there if I want to but at the end of the day I'm just mainly writing stories. But the option is there and I may do it in the future, but...

Geri: (00:05:53:03) Now is there a financial incentive for you too?

Niraj: (00:05:56:19) No, not really. (*Laughter*) It's the same thing.

Geri: (00:06:08:00) And so you're doing pod casts as well?

Niraj: (00:06:11:00) Yeah., we're doing pod casts and audio. We're not so much doing broadcasts. If we have anything we'll put it online, that type of thing.

Bob: (00:06:21:00) Changing field...I'd never even heard that term before, "sound slides."

Geri: (00:06:30:15) Yeah last week and I think its just pictures over voice...

(*Ask man to move out of shot*)

Geri: (00:07:46:00) Can you tell us about the situation again where somebody was portrayed as a terrorist?

Niraj: (00:07:54:00) I think what happens a lot of times is we do stories on Arab Americans who have been accused of having links with terrorism, we put their pictures on the front page, we have headlines. And then two years later—after they're acquitted—or all the terrorism chargers are thrown out. But by then the damage has been done. The reputation have been tarnished. So even though we do write follow up stories that they are innocent, a lot of times the damage has been done. So you do feel bad in those cases in that I have fairly tarnished that persons reputation? Have I unfairly linked them to terrorism? And so these are things that we have to be careful with as journalists.

Geri: (00:08:34:00) And you felt a little restrained in the newsroom talking about media coverage. Was there something that you wanted to add?

Niraj: (00:08:44:10) I think we covered it. I think the *Free Press* is a really great newspaper. I think they've given me chance to cover a wide range of stories. And I think we are open o communities. So in general, I think we do a job. I think at times we don't cover the communities as thoroughly as we should. We just sort of kind of hit and miss sometimes. I think we could be even doing more coverage because you know I really think it's such a vital part of Michigan. There's the auto industry, the African American community and then the Arab American community. Those are the three things that really define Michigan. That make us unique compared to any other state in the country. And out of those three, the Arab American issue is the latest so if anything I think we need to beef up our coverage and make it a fundamental part—not just for me but for other reporters.

Geri: (00:09:44:23) Have you ever encountered internal biases in your coverage, meaning editors or other people or reporters?

Niraj: (00:09:53:20) Yeah, I think. Yeah I do think some editors have some preconceived notions bout some certain communities. I remember talking to a former reporter at *The Detroit Free Press* who was telling me about some things that a senior editor has said to him, kind of, about his appearance. It didn't happen to me, it happened to him. So I think that is out there. People unfortunately have some prejudices. But there's been nothing over—No one has ever said anything to me. But you do hear things now and then casually among editors. Some editors are great. And that's another issue, some people in the paper are really into coverage of these types of things. Some are just not. Some just don't have an interest. They don't care. So it kind of varies.

Geri: (00:10:54:22) I heard some really nice things said by Mr. Hamaad and Ms. Aboos about your coverage and I've heard it echoed by other people we've talked to. What makes you different from other reporters?

Niraj: (00:11:12:00) Well, I think—first of all, I'd say other reporters do a great job too. You know there are others, other newspapers, or on the TV who do a really good job of covering Arab American communities. So but I appreciate their comments. I think the main thing is to keep open. The main thing is to be open with people and to listen. As Amad was saying, there are many cases where they haven't been thrilled with a story I've written. But the important thing is I listen to people. I hear what they have to say. And number two, I'm honest. I'm very open with people. I tell them, "Look this is what I'm doing. This is what the story is about. This is the direction of the story. And I've called them all at all hours of the day. I've called them after midnight. I've called them in the morning. Because I want to keep that open line of communication. So if the story's going to be in the paper the next day, I know he might have some issues with it. So I call him and tell him, "just so you know, this story's going in the tomorrow's paper that I'm writing and that we talked about earlier." Because he is a trusted source and so I feel it's important to be open with him at all times.

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