

Geri: (00:05:00:11) Okay, Niraj. We're going to start from the beginning.

Niraj: (00:05:03:00) Okay, sure.

Geri: (00:05:05:10) Where were you born? Talk about where you went to school.

Niraj: (00:05:18:00) Okay. I was born in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. A town in southwestern PA. I went to school at Columbia University, graduated with a bachelor's degree in political science. Worked for a couple years and then went back to Columbia and got my master's in journalism.

Geri: (00:05:35:05) Why journalism?

Niraj: (00:05:37:15) I was always interested in political issues and social issues. So I figured that would be a good way to deal with those on a regular basis. I grew up reading the newspaper at home. Subscribed the local daily newspaper and my parents would read *The New York Times* on Sundays. So that kind of inculcated in me the desire to be a reporter.

Geri: (00:06:02:00) So you started reporting where? And then how did you get to *The Detroit Free Press*?

Niraj: (00:06:06:20) Sure. I worked for a small newspaper in Brooklyn called *The Brooklyn Paper*, it was only for about a year and a half. Then I went to graduate school. Then after graduate school I worked on an internship at *Newsday* for about eight-nine months. And then after that internship I got a job at the *Free Press*.

Geri: (00:06:24:10) So you've been here since?

Niraj: (00:06:26:18) '98.

Geri: (00:06:29:10) And what have you covered in *The Detroit Free Press*?

Niraj: (00:06:32:20) It kind of varied when I first started. I did everything from like obituaries to general assignment. I worked for a short while in the Detroit Police Bureau covering crime. And then I've covered western Wayne County for a number of years. I used to cover like the whole county, like the western Wayne part of it with another reporter. Now I kind of focus on the Arab American or Muslim community and other immigrant issues.

Geri: (00:07:02:10) I read an article on Poynter dot org that focused on your coverage of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Can you talk about that day?

Niraj: (00:07:17:20) Sure. Yeah, I remember getting a phone call.

(\*Interruption\*)

Geri: (00:08:20:00) So let's talk about September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Niraj: (00:08:22:00) Okay. Yeah sure, I had been covering Arab American issues before that so I was familiar with the community. And I remember when the attack happened I was worried. I didn't want to prejudge who had committed the attacks. So I felt kind of guilty calling up Arab American sources because I didn't want to assume that it was an Arab person or a Muslim person. At the same time, I wanted to be on top of things. But I knew even if Arab Americans were not responsible for it, they would be in

many ways unfairly blamed. For example, after the Oklahoma attacks, a lot of people rushed to judgment and assumed it was Muslims but it wasn't. It was obviously a domestic terrorist. That was in the back of my mind. But when I did make the calls people were very happy to talk. They were not reluctant. Because they knew me, they trusted me, so I was able to speak with them and get their reaction on that day. And at first I worked the phones, then I drove out to Dearborn and I interviewed people there in person.

Geri: (00:09:24:00) Who did you interview?

Niraj: (00:09:26:00) The first person I called actually was Ammad Hamaad, who's the head of the Michigan branch of the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. He was actually not in Dearborn. Ironically, he was in Washington D.C. that day to meet with officials of the airline industry to talk about profiling of Arab Americans. So he was there. But of course the meeting was cancelled. I reached one of his assistants and I remember interviewing him over the phone. And then after that I drove out to Dearborn and interviewed people in centers and on the streets about their reactions.

Geri: (00:10:07:00) So was covering the Arab American community prior to September 11<sup>th</sup> a beat?

Niraj: (00:10:13:00) Yeah, it was a part of my beat. I did a lot of stories on the community. Not as much as I do now. I remember, like a month before September 11<sup>th</sup>, I did a story on the wetlands. Which are areas of the environment which have been neglected so I remember working on that. I used to do a lot of stories on workplace safety that was sort of my specialty. There was an explosion at the Ford Rouge plant in 1999 that killed six workers and it turns out Ford had neglected the company's safety in that facility for a number of years. So while I did cover Arab Americans, it wasn't a major part of my beat. But it was substantial enough that I was familiar with the community and did a lot of work in reaching out to members in the area.

Geri: (00:10:56:15) Tell us about some of the stories you've covered since September 11<sup>th</sup>?

Niraj: (00:11:01:00) It kind of varies. I remember in the aftermath of 9/11 there was a lot of—we did stories the government's—some would call it a crackdown. Others would say they were trying to fight the war on terrorism. There was a case involving a Muslim leader named Rabeya Hadad. He was a Muslim leader from Ann Arbor who was detained by the authorities in December of 2001. And what made that case sort of unique was the government closed the federal hearings to the public and to the media. And so *The Detroit Free Press* filed a lawsuit against the government. We filed along with other media outlets. And eventually we won, but that was years later, after the case had been over. But we felt it was important that the public should be allowed into these immigration hearings. It turns out, that the government had done is they had invoked the Patriot Act to close the hearing. But at the time they were saying it was for national security interest, but they never really told us what exactly was the reason behind the closing of it.

Geri: (00:12:07:15) So most of your coverage has been on the Arab American community in metro-Detroit? Or have you also covered national?

Niraj: (00:12:16:15) No. It's because we are a regional newspaper, I cover metro-Detroit and issues. Occasionally we'll do stuff on Arab Americans outside the region but almost always it's we try to have a very strong local connections. There's always a local you can find because Michigan has the highest concentration of Arab Americans than any other state in the country according to 2000 Census figures.

Geri: (00:12:41:20) When you started to cover that beat, how did you appear to cover that community? How did you prepare to cover that community? Did you do any research prior to that time?

Niraj: (00:12:50:10) I just touched bases with certain people in the community and listened to them. I just spend a lot of time listening to sources, hanging out at community events, having lunch with them, going to their offices. And of course, like any reporter, I looked at previous clips people had written in the past. Because usually with any beat there's been reporters in the past who have covered these types of issues. So I make sure to look over those to make sure there wasn't any controversy. For example, there was a long running dispute between Arab Americans and the former mayor of Dearborn, who is now deceased. So I looked back into clips over those stories to see what's the tension between those two groups.

Geri: (00:13:35:20) And what is your ethnicity?

Niraj: (00:13:37:25) I'm of Indian background. My parents were originally from India

Geri: (00:13:42:10) And with the Arab American culture, what are some of the cultural things that have surprised you? Some of the differences?

Niraj: (00:13:50:25) Umm...The differences between Arab and Indian?

Geri: (00:13:54:20) Yeah, just the things like that you never knew about?

Niraj: (00:13:59:00) Never knew about them...Ummm...I've actually noticed a lot of similarities between Arab Americans and Indian Americans. Like when I interview a lot of the Arabs it reminds me of the people in my community and the traditions and the cultures. And so if anything, I think I was surprised to find out there was a lot of similarities in the background. So that was something that was kind of interesting to find out.

Geri: (00:14:32:00) Similarities, can you go into that again? What are the similarities?

Niraj: (00:14:37:00) Just the sense of coming to America for a better life. Trying to get an education. You know, a lot of immigrants come here to try to study at Wayne State or other universities. So that's in one way. Also, like family, and all the other families have that too, just the sense of coming from a third world country to here—I can sort of relate to that, their concerns. Also issues of discrimination, that's something that I have to deal with and I think people in the Indian community can understand that too.

Geri: (00:15:13:00) How about religion? What are some of the things you've learned about Islam and Catholicism and the Chaldean-Catholic sect, too?

Niraj: (00:15:25:25) Sure, yeah, I've learned that there's a great deal of diversity within the Muslim community. There's Shias, there's Sunnis. And within the groups there's a great deal of diversity. I mean, the Shias have different groups within them. The Sunnis

have them too. So I learned there's really no monolithic Islam or one set idea of what Muslims are about. It varies a lot. So I've spent a lot of time, specifically in the Shiite community. I've gone to a lot of their events. They have this ten day thing called Muharam, which is unique to Shias. So I've learned a lot of the things that they do, practices, rituals, and recessions. And I'd like to do more reporting on the Sufi community, which I have not done so much—I'm actually planning on doing that this year. And they're kind of unique because they tend to have more of an open sense of religions, than say other groups. But that's a group that really hasn't been reported on that much.

Geri: (00:16:30:00) So what are the groups and can you start with what are the largest group and so on and so forth within the Arab community?

Niraj: (00:16:41:04) Sure. The largest group, according to census figures, is the Lebanese community, followed by the Iraqi community. Within the Iraqi community, the Chaldean community. Chaldeans as you may know, are Iraqi-Catholics. They're a huge community. And both the Lebanese and Iraqis and Chaldeans have been here for a long time. They're community goes back generations. I should also say that the earlier community in metro-Detroit was a Christian community, whereas the recent arrivals seem to be more Muslim. So Lebanese, Iraqi, then you have Palestinians and Yemeni community. There's substantial numbers of them. And there's also increasingly people from Egypt. But Egypt tends to be a much smaller population in metro-Detroit than compared to New Jersey. New Jersey has a much larger Egyptian community.

Geri: (00:17:39:10) And these groups are concentrated geographically?

Niraj: (00:17:42:22) Right.

Geri: (00:17:43:00) Could you go over that?

Niraj: (00:17:44:00) Sure. And Dearborn has a very big Lebanese community. But Dearborn—the Arab community is so large—it's gotten really diverse now. But if you had to choose, you would say: Lebanese, followed by Yemenis, followed by Palestinian and Iraqi-Shiite. It's sort of the same number of Palestinians and Iraqi-Shia in Dearborn. The Palestinian community, especially the Christian community, tends to be further west from Dearborn. Places like Westland. Livonia has a large Christian-Palestinian community. There's a really nice Palestinian church in Livonia that was recently built. The Ramala Club—Ramala is a city in the West Bank that a lot of people have roots in. That's based in Westland. And then if you go further north to Oakland County, there's a very huge Iraqi-Christian community. A lot of Chaldean churches—there's one in Southfield, one in West Bloomfield. The Chaldeans are also moving to places like Sterling Heights and Warren, further in Macomb County. And then the non-Arab Muslim community also tends to be in Oakland County. Probably like Indian and Pakistani-Muslim community, are like in Troy and Rochester Hills and Bloomfield Hills. There's a prominent Indian-Pakistani mosque in Rochester Hills. Then I don't know if you were looking at the African American Muslim community—but a lot of their mosques are in Detroit or Hamtramck.

Geri: (00:19:23:20) Most of your coverage concentrates in Dearborn?

Niraj: (00:19:27:08) Right, that's where my base is but it kind of varies. Wherever the communities are at, I'll do a story on it. Like for example, I've been doing stories on illegal immigration issues. A lot of it is based in Detroit and the Latino or Mexican American community. But also in the Albanian community. There's a huge Albanian community in Oakland County so it kind of depends on where it's at.

Geri: (00:19:53:00) Sounds so complex to me. For you it's....

Niraj: (00:19:56:10) No.

Geri: (00:20:00:15) So we've heard the Arab American community or read that it's a group that's been characterized that it's highly educated, is more affluent than the national average. Is that accurate?

Niraj: (00:20:12:00) Yeah, I think that statistics show that the US Census that the average income for Arab Americans I know are higher than the average American. What's interesting about that is it's different from in Europe. You know, in Europe there's a lot of talk about the issue of their Arab community and their Muslim community. But those communities tend to be poorer less educated. You may remember there were some riots in France in late 2005 in the Arab community. There's been some unrest in the Muslim community in England in recent years. Which you don't see that in America, right. The Arab American Muslim communities seem to be more assimilated, much better off. And that's actually something that the US State Department has been really pushing in their outreach to Muslims across the world. They're trying to show, "Hey look. We don't hate Muslims. Muslims here do very well. They have high incomes. They're very assimilated." So they're trying to show that America is not necessarily hostile to Muslims. Because of course there's a perception out there with the Iraq War and other things, so.

Geri: (00:21:19:00) Generally speaking, what is the relationship between the Arab American community and the Jewish community?

Niraj: (00:21:25:20) That's a good question. It kind of goes up and down. To be honest, recently there's been a rocky relationship. Especially because of the war between Israel and Hezbollah. There were some protests in Dearborn last year. Where people said some things and held up some signs, caused some problems for people in the Jewish community. And then the Jewish community held their own rallies and their own events. And some things that were said at those events made people in the Arab community upset. So over the past years the relationships haven't been that great. But they do talk on certain levels. So that's good. You know they haven't turned off the dialogue, they're still talking. They're still reaching out, but this past year has been kind of tough for the two sides getting along.

Geri: (00:22:18:13) What do you think about coverage? News media coverage of those specific rallies?

Niraj: (00:22:25:23) I think, I know, I'm going to anticipate what the Arab American communities opinion was of it. It was that they thought maybe the media—including us—put too much emphasis on Hezbollah. The emphasis of support of a group to the US government because there was to be a terrorist group. I understand that concern. But that was part of our coverage but that wasn't our main focus. Our main focus was pretty

straight forward. I remember when they had ten thousand people in Dearborn it was a pretty straight news story that there was ten thousand people and here's what they said. And the issue of Hezbollah—just to give you some background—I had done a story before the war started on how there had been an increase of Hezbollah persecutions in metro-Detroit. And we we're going through federal court documents and we found out federal authorities were very serious about going after any support for Hezbollah. In metro Detroit though, a lot of people—I shouldn't say a lot—some in the Arab American community felt that Hezbollah is a heroic resistance group rather than a terrorist group. But the US government thinks differently. So naturally there were some tensions when we wrote that story. But we sort of felt like we were telling, this is what's going on, this what the US government is doing, this is how they feel, these are the number of persecutions that they're going against Hezbollah. So I think that was some thought that we were focusing too much on that. If the government is doing it we have to report that. We have to say this what they're doing whether we like it or not. So I thought we were fair. I thought we were balanced between the Arab and the Jewish side. You know, sometimes in the Jewish community, people thought we were being too pro-Arab and pro-Muslim. In fact, the *Free-Press* gets criticized very often for being labeled to liberal of a paper, too far on the left. In fact, that perception is out there a lot. So to make a long story short, I think the *Free-Press* gets it from both sides. We get accused of being too pro-Arab or too pro-Jewish. So I think that at least we try to keep it in the middle.

Geri: (00:24:31:10) Did you watch TV news coverage of the rallies?

Niraj: (00:24:36:00) I did. I was looking at what channel 4 and channel 7 were doing. (\*Coughs\*) Sorry. I was looking at what channel 2 and channel 4 and channel 7 were doing. At the same time I remember it was a really hectic time period so I didn't get to watch all the broadcasts. But I do remember some stations that wouldn't accurately describe things or put things in context—there was one reporter—I remember there was some concern about involving. It's a long story. There was this controversy about this Jewish group. There's this Jewish group of rabbis that are just very pro-Arab and very pro-Muslim so much so that they hate the state of Israel. They're kind of highly unusual group. So the Arab community brought them into town to show hey we're not anti Jewish. But this Jewish group had really no authority in the Jewish community. So I remember they were on TV a bit, but there wasn't kind of context explained for that group and who they were. But I'm not necessarily picking on that one TV station. I know a lot of times you know media outlets don't have a lot of time to report things or even much room. So if you only have 30 seconds or 15 seconds to show something you might now have enough time to describe everything in that time period.

Geri: (00:25:51:00) What other critiques do you have of television news media or any other media coverage of the Arab American community?

Niraj: (00:25:58:20) Well this criticism I would make—and I'm included in this too—I'm not criticizing others, I think I do this too. Like a lot of times—I'll just speak or myself—I think my coverage is just too superficial, I don't go into depth. I just kind of gloss over things. So I think sometimes I could do a better job at explaining things in a more in depth way, with more detail and more context for readers to understand what's going on. I think a lot of times I just skip over things. So that's a way I could improve.

Geri: (00:26:36:00) And is this something you've been consciously doing then in the past few years?

Niraj: (00:26:40:20) Yeah, I've been trying to offer more context and analysis in my stories. But I don't always do that, for whatever reasons. Maybe I don't have time or just the space isn't there or maybe it's my own short comings. But yeah it is something that I'm trying to do.

Geri: (00:27:01:15) So you mentioned in a couple issues that the Arab American community faces—they face immigration issues and terroristic issues. What other issues does that community face?

Niraj: (00:27:17:15) Face in that. I think they're facing the challenge of becoming part of the political mainstream. They want to get more involved in politics. They want to get involved more in becoming part of the fabric of metro-Detroit. And that's a challenge that's been made tougher by the 9/11 attacks and Iraq war. And that's one of the challenges of the community, like, "Can we acquire political power in Michigan?"

Geri: (00:27:46:00) And are they finding success?

Niraj: (00:27:51:05) I think they are. They've been increasingly influential in places like Wayne County. A lot of the top people in that county are Arab American. At the state level, the governor has appointed a lot of them to certain positions...I don't think he's head of the DOT, but one of the top official in the Department of Transportation is Arab American. And they've made progress, even despite the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. They've increasingly become a public part of Michigan.

Geri: (00:28:26:00) So how do you prepare to cover this community. What websites and I see some other publications on your desk? Do you read?

Niraj: (00:28:37:00) Yeah, definitely. And in fact one of the interesting things about the Arab community is there's been an increase in the number of media outlets there, despite the tough economy there's all these new newspapers and publications coming up in the Arab American community. They just started a new religious oriented newspaper in the Arab American community just two months ago. The Lebanese community launched a magazine last year. So the Iraqi community had one that just started two years ago. So it's been huge increase in the number of media outlets in the past five years...from all parts of the community. So I try to read those either online or in print, that's the one way I try to keep up on what's going on. And the second way is talking to people. I spend a lot of time talking to people on the phone or in person.

Geri: (00:29:29:00) And what national outlets do you read?

Niraj: (00:29:33:10) Everyday, on a regular basis, I read *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*...*Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago-Sun Tribune*. But most definitely *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Magazines, I read, like, *The Nation*. (\*Coughs\*) Sorry one second. I also keep track of whether their conservative websites or liberal websites. I try to monitor them to try to keep track of what's going on. I make sure I read blogs and media outlets from all ends of the political spectrum.

Geri: (00:30:11:20) Just from being a subscriber to *The Detroit Free-Press*, I noticed an increase in coverage of the Arab community. Is that something you noticed as well?

Niraj: (00:30:24:22) Yeah. I think we do cover more now than in the past. I think there has been some increased coverage of it. I think there's more of an awareness of it. It's a big part of our community. There's really, I think, three things that make metro-Detroit unique. First of course, is the auto industry, I mean, it defines us. Second is the Afro-American community. Detroit is the largest majority African American city in the country. Number three would be the Arab American community. We have the largest concentration of Arab Americans among all 50 states. So I think those three things are really important. But the Arab American is sort of the latest thing in that. So maybe like 10 years ago there wasn't much awareness, but now there is I think. So it's a big part of the fabric of southeastern Michigan, or Michigan in general.

Geri: (00:31:11:15) Now is there a relationship between the Arab American and the African American community?

Niraj: (00:31:17:00) There is. To be honest, there has been some tensions over the years. A lot of tensions before in the past would center around disputes between Arab storeowners and African American customers. Like in Detroit, there was an incident a few years ago, where an Arab store owner I believe killed, or at least injured, an African American customer. And there were some protests and some boycotts after that. So those tensions kind of flare up every now and then. But lately they've been pretty good. The two communities do get along. I know that the American Arab Chamber works a lot with the Detroit mayor with people in the city. So those tensions I would say were more four or five years ago. So I think that they've cooled off. And I also think that they've recognized that they have a lot of similar struggles to deal with, such as profiling, civil rights. So tensions have been proving over the last couple of years.

Geri: (00:32:16:07) The last question I have concerns this 100 Questions and Answers of Arab Americans. Did you contribute to that publication?

Niraj: (00:32:23:15) You know, I didn't—I might have a little bit but I didn't do it in any formal way. The person who really deserves credit for that is Joe Grimm. I mean, he did a lot of work into that, so I really can't take any credit for that, it's really Joe. Joe did a great job on that. It's a really great tool and it's really good that he put that together.

Geri: (00:32:47:20) I remember Googling you a few months ago. You've been speaking on this issue in various parts of the country. Is that right?

Niraj: (00:32:57:00) Right, yeah at different forums or seminars in California or wherever, yeah.

Geri: (00:33:01:25) Is this of late?

Niraj: (00:33:03:14) Yeah, over the past, you know, since 9/11. I remember in the past I spoke at an IRE conference about this issue. This was before the 9/11 attacks. I remember speaking about Arab Americans. But that was the only time I did that. And after that there was much more of an attention to it.

Geri: (00:33:37:12) And so what have been some of the questions raised at these events that you've spoken at?

Niraj: (00:33:42:13) The questions that people ask...Well, one thing that's interesting—people also try to get your political views on stuff. I remember being asked one time, “So what's your take on the Iraq War? Are you for it or are you against it?” as a reporter you really should not take positions on this. For example, I'm very careful not to say political views on sensitive issue in public. I never say, “Well one is for something or against something.” Whether you're republican or democrat because you should try to stay very neutral. And that's very important. So I do get those questions and I can't answer them fully. Other questions people ask is, “How is the Muslim community or the Arab community been treated over the past few years?” That's a question I get asked a lot.

Geri: (00:34:27:00) Any other questions?

Bob: (00:34:29:00) I have a few.

Niraj: (00:34:30:00) Sure, yeah, yeah.

Bob: (00:34:31:05) Direct your answers to her. What is it that you felt the over coverage of Arab Americans or the issues surround that community had been superficial. There were thing that, had you dug deeper it might have been a better performance. So could you give a specific example of that?

Niraj: (00:35:00:18) Sure. I remember that I did a story, for example, on (\*Laughter\*) I did a story on Muharaam, which is the 10-day holiday celebrated by Shia Muslims. And when in I first did it in 2002 it was very much more of a straightforward story that just told the basic details of Muharaam. Didn't really go into depth of how big of a deal it was in the Shia Muslim community. I remember thinking after reading it thinking, this story really doesn't tell you much about the community and why it's important to them. So that's something that I could have done a better job of fleshing out and give the readers more details about the celebration.

Geri: (00:35:46:15) Did someone email you or call you about your lack of information?

Niraj: (00:35:50:18) You know, I don't think anyone emailed me because it as a really short story so maybe people realize...In terms of email complaints, I get a ton of those. So I mean I get flooded with emails and voicemails. A lot of it very anti-immigrant. Very anti-Arab and anti-Muslim. But then there are other people who do like the coverage in that so that's something. So yeah that's something. We try to be very...you're going to get people on both sides who think you're bring one sided on either way.

Geri: (00:36:27:05) So what is the percentage of? We heard you did a great job in...you got it all wrong types of emails?

Niraj: (00:36:35:15) I'd say maybe---that's a good question—I'd say seventy or eighty percent tend to be anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, maybe twenty percent is pro-immigrant, pro-Arab, pro-Muslim.

Bob: (00:36:57:00) One of the specific criticisms of the coverage of last year's demonstrations was that the Arab American, particularly the Lebanese community felt that many of them were there because they had so many relatives that they were worried about, but it got portrayed as support of terrorism and not as support of their own

families. Do you think that's a justifiable criticism that the Free Press and Television did not provide that perspective?

Niraj: (00:37:29:19) Well, yeah, I heard that criticism. That criticism, I hear that a lot. And people were saying, "Hey, look, you know my brother, my mother are under bombardment." And we had some really heart-wrenching stories. I remember speaking with a woman and her family on the phone from Lebanon. Who had just went under and suffered this four day bombardment. And it was really touching and really moving to hear these stories. But I do think the *Free-Press* did a good job of covering that. Like the first three days the emphasis was really on people from metro-Detroit trapped in the crossfire, people under siege. We try to—and it was really emotional, some of our stories—and I tried to get a lot of great help from other reporters. So it wasn't just me. And later on during the rallies and that and some people at the rallies brought Hezbollah up and Nasarallah. Nasarallah is the head of Hezbollah. You know, they were holding up pictures of Nasarallah. So it's we had to report. We had to say look this is what's people's reality is. That's what we were saying. And what they were saying concerned people in the Jewish community. Just to give you some context—those rallies became a really big deal in the Jewish community, not just here but nationally. There was a column written in the *Forward*, which is one of the leading Jewish newspapers, about the Dearborn rally. That's where it was picked up by the *Jerusalem Post*. Which is I think the largest circulation Jerusalem newspaper, but so that article really criticized the Dearborn rallies. So we had to report it. We had to say there's this concern that there were some pro-Hezbollah people at the rally. But I don't think we emphasized it. I don't think our emphasis was "a pro-Hezbollah rally in the streets of Dearborn." So yes this was a pro-Hezbollah speech on the streets of Dearborn. I think we wrote a story where yes there was a protest and later on we would say to report Hezbollah. But to give context, I there was concern that before the war we started to give this story about an increase in Hezbollah persecutions but that was before the war started. But like I said, in that story, all we were really doing was just saying, "Hey, the US government is increasingly taking a look at Hezbollah activity in Michigan. There's been an increase in persecutions. If you go through the court documents you can see this. And of course we gave the perspective of the Arab American community so we feel these persecutions were handled fairly that we reported. The other thing I forgot to add—the whole Hezbollah thing, just to add the news hook to it—there's a chain of restaurants in metro-Detroit called La Shish. La Shish is the most popular chain of Arab restaurants. The head of that group, of that restaurant is Halal Shaheen. The US court documents said Shaheen supported Hezbollah. they produced photographs, showing pictures of him with the spiritual head of Hezbollah. And that was sort of impudence for the larger story. But like I said, we're not necessarily taking sides. We're going look the government's cracking down on Hezbollah and now we have to report this.

Geri: (00:40:38:20) So how do you—I guess it's all case-by-case—but how do you respond to criticism in emails and calls?

Niraj: (00:40:47:01) I welcome criticism. I like it. I think it's important that we have an open line of communication with people. I'm glad when people call in and say, "I thought you could have done a better job on this and I thought you could have done a better job on that." Because I think that helps us do a better job. So I'm always—I have

an open ear. I listen to people, listen to what they have to say. Take into consideration their thoughts and their comments. A lot of it is through email—people are increasingly using that. So that makes it easier because you don't have to spend half an hour listening to somebody on the phone. But although I do talk to people on the phone all the time. I'm talking specifically about people here who are complaining. But sometimes you do get extreme callers. People who are calling at two o'clock in the morning just ranting and raving and saying hateful things. I have a lot of people calling up and saying racial slurs and ethnic slurs and things like that. So obviously those aren't pleasurable to deal with but it's good to know what the public has to say.

Geri: (00:41:49:23) So do you just say thank you very much and then click?

Niraj: (00:41:53:16) Yeah, I mean, thank you very much and I'm glad you called, it's important to hear what you have to say. And the hateful one's will just go on and on but and then just tell that I have to go. It's always best to be polite.

Geri: (00:42:09:21) And how about the emails that rant and rave?

Niraj: (00:42:13:18) Sometimes I may not really respond to all of them. Because sometimes you get so many so I try to just say, "Thanks for your time." It depends, if it's a thoughtful critique and someone says something I may start up a correspondence with them and use them as a future source. So it depends on if I have time to respond to all of them. Sometimes you just don't have time. You get emails and don't have the time to respond to all of them. Some of the reporters have that same issue too.

Bob: (00:42:44:00) Every time I read the newspaper or turn on the television and see a person of Arab descent they're holding an AK47 or they're masked. How would you respond to that?

Niraj: (00:43:04:15) Say that again.

Bob: (00:43:08:15) I pick up a newspaper it's someone with an AK47 or a black mask or doing something horrible. And I see the same thing in television news. Do you think that's true?

Niraj: (00:43:23:07) I see your point. There's a lot of stereotype Muslims and Arabs in the community. And with the Iraq War going on daily, there could be a problem with people seeing negative image of Arabs and Muslims. So that's definitely an issue out there. I think in local reporting, newspapers I think tend to be more aware of that and we have more diverse voices. There's an attempt at the *Free-Press* for example—not just with me, but with other reporters—to incorporate Arabs and Muslims into stories that have nothing to do with terrorism or civil rights issues. So that an important thing that we try to do at the *Free-Press*...at the metro desk or at the business desk. But I see your point, I mean there can be an issue where you only see Arabs or Muslims in the context of terrorism or the Iraq War. And that can produce negative images of the community or that can create negative ideas within the public.

Bob: (00:44:33:00) Could you give us a specific example of a counter-tendency in a story?

Niraj: (00:44:38:25) Sure. For example at *The Detroit Free-Press* we've created a database of diverse sources that we encourage people to use not necessarily for minority

issues. So for example, if you're doing a story of environmental awareness, there may be an Arab American expert out there on the environment and you can quote him. I know there are some other reporters and writers who have worked in this database over the past year. So that's an example. We're trying to get around the just using Arab Americans for certain types of stories.

Geri: (00:45:16:08) Is that part of Gannet's mainstreaming?

Niraj: (00:45:19:10) Oh yeah, you're aware of it. Yeah I think that is part of it. That's what it's called. I couldn't think of the phrase of it, the phrase. It's mainstream.

Geri: (00:45:29:00) All right.

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