

Nolan Finley Interview

(00:07:00) Isn't that a mess. It's that a mess. I imagine we'll be tied up with that all day. I mean this, the two things that are preoccupying us now are this Democratic Party doover and the Kilpatrick scandal, which seems to get a little worse every day but it keeps things interesting.

(02:40:23) Geri: You've been the editorial page editor since 2000. And on a blog you direct the expression

(03:05:28) Finley: It's the opinions of the newspaper. It's the opinions we express on the editorial page. That's it in a nutshell, you know the positions we take on issues. Everything

Geri: Characterize your expression

Finley: Sure. We are a right of center conservative page. Conservative on economic issues, government issues, taxes uh...oh more moderate on social issues.

Geri: And this is in contrast to the Free Press?

Finley: I would contrast the Free Press as slight left of center and more liberal on all of those issues, but you'll frequently take a look at their page and our page and find us in agreement on a on one issue or another. We try to be more pragmatic than ideological. Uh solutions oriented. We recognize uh that not all issues fit into a mold and can be resolved with by preaching to the ideological bag that you sometimes have to take that quite often you have to take a pragmatic approach and get a problem solved.

Geri: And would you say that the expression is that um, directed by you or directed by uh uh, who.

(04:30:11) We have editorial writers. We have an editorial board that the editorial writers sit on. And as well as the publishers and we hash things out. I direct that process I guess is a better way of saying it.

Geri: Could you speak specifically on...yah. Could you describe the News' editorial stance on Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Finley: Yeah I think we've expressed that um, quite uh, quite specifically and frequently. Uh we support Israel, Israel's position in the conflict um, we are we have been very adamantly opposed to terrorism both in Israel and anywhere else in the world not just the Middle East. We think that terrorism and violence is the wrong way to press a political agenda and we believe that if terrorism ended there'd be a path to peace and a rather rapid path to peace.

Geri: And that's something you addressed in a February 5, 2006 editorial.

Finley: Among other times I think.

---technical break --- chatting about Kentucky basketball...

(07:27:13) Geri: Letters to the editor, probably. Tell us about the reactions you received.

Finley: Oh well yes, yes, it wasn't untypical in terms of the response we receive when we write on the issue. People in this community feel very passionate. Um, both the Jewish community and the Arab community and the secular community and the rest of the folks feel very passionate about this issue. That's why we write about it. We have a big Jewish community, a big Arab community um, and people have very strong opinions and those who disagree with us express themselves very passionately and you know, we try to give them the opportunity to express themselves, to offer their opinions to present the counter-arguments to the ones we present, and it's only fair. And we, we, we tend to get, when we write about that issue, a lot of response so and I think that if you've seen this past week or so, um, that we run a column once a month from a, from a Muslim-Eman from Dearborn who frequently provokes a strong reaction as well and if you've noticed our letters over the last couple weeks, it's been a lot of back and forth between um, supporters of Israel and supporters of the Palestinians reacting to that and we try to give everyone a forum, a place to air their views, have a community discussion, hope it's civil and uh, well most of the time it is.

Geri: Editorial responses. It would seem to me that the relationship between the two communities is pretty ... volatile...

(09:24:18) Finley: Volatile might be too strong a word. I think, you know, it's not unlike a lot of other issues in this country today. People take strong positions on one side or the other. And it's hard for them to listen to each other. Uh, it's not just this issue, it's politics in general. Um, it's the nature of discourse in our society today. I don't, I wouldn't describe the relationship as volatile I think there's a lot of good people and a lot of efforts being made not necessarily to make them agree because they're not going to agree, but at least to defuse any hard feelings that arise out of their disagreements.

Geri: You mentioned that a lot of reaction on this issue. Can you talk about how many letters you receive ...

Oh my, we receive hundreds of letters um, on this. And which is a good thing because people care and so they write, and they offer views that, that they would like to see in the paper and we also print uh..., I think after this print piece we printed a couple of op-eds on our op-ed page from people who hold a different opinion and I think that's how, how we give everyone a chance um, to put their views before the public.

Pat: ... screening process of the letters that get onto the page.

(10:53:04) Finley: Well, we're, we're looking for letters that express, um express themselves the most articulately. Um, we try to publish the bulk of them, obviously we can't publish them all, but we try to publish a representative sample. You throw out the ones that are uncivil or use

inappropriate language or you know, are indecipherable, which, which happens, um... and then you use a, a sampling of what's left. I don't think we have any, beyond that, any rigorous screen, it's more or less a random process for getting these letters in. But we try to run over the course of – I think we ran letters on this for two weeks – over the course of a couple weeks we try to get as many of them in as we can uh, as we can print. And of course online there's no limits and we get a lot of response on the Web, because most of our stuff is also posted on the Web and the comments there, everything goes up so...

(11:55:20) Geri: Now well I would like to share with you some of the interviews that we have and I would like you to react to them.

Bob: And this is not intended to be any type of ambush.

---watching the Siblani interview ---(14:30:00) – (16:05:00)

Geri: Do you agree with this?

Finley: Well, uh. Certainly editorial opinions can change and they certainly can evolve and they have, at this paper on some issues over time um Generally you evolve based on circumstances not on external pressure from folks who don't like your opinion. Uh, I'll give you an example: We've evolved our position on the war in Iraq from the beginning, the beginning days based on circumstances, uh, information, changes, uh... and our perspective, what have you. I don't this, I don't know that we've changed our position at all on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I think it's the same. I will say it's the same as it's been. We believe it's the right position for us. We recognize that others have a different opinion. That's for the case on most issues. Uh, we're uh a position, a newspaper that's strongly supported Israel in this conflict. Other newspapers strongly support the Palestinians.

Geri: Is the present stance. So you're saying the previous editor had a similar stance.

Finley: Well he's (Siblani) talking about publishers and um, I was present when the conversation he was describing took place and um. He suggests a bit of a promise that there would be gradual changes. There was, that wasn't, that's not the case. If circumstances change, conditions change, our opinions can change, but to this point uh, at this time, that's not the case.

---another Siblani screening--- (18:15:00) – (19:11:10)

Siblani: He says the Palestinians have "lust for Jewish blood" ...

Finley: Well um, that's a mischaracterization of anything I've said. I've never said all Palestinians are terrorists, um, I've never spoken about the Palestinian community in this country. That's a, a stretch by Mr., Mr. Siblani. And I've been a supporter of a Palestinian state. The newspaper is a supporter of a Palestinian state. We don't believe the path to that state is a violent path. We think that peace has to come first and that a cessation of the terrorism and a cessation of the violence has to be a precursor of any, of any peace talks, but we do support the idea of a two-state solution and we've never characterized all Palestinians, particularly the Palestinians in this country as terrorists. What I did say in that article, and I'll stand by it today,

is that the terrorism in the Palestinian territories couldn't exist without the tasset of support of the Pal people. That they've tied their faith too much to the people who advocate a violent solution to this conflict and they have to accept some of the consequences of that and some of the responsibility for that.

Geri: Is there a way that you can correct the misunderstandings.

(20:41:10) Well I don't, I mean the misunderstandings is in his mind and in his perception and Mr. Siblani's a newspaper publisher and I would allow that there's a lot of people in this town who would passionately disagree with the opinions that his newspaper expresses. And um I would say that he would sit in this same chair and say that he bases his opinion on, on very strong beliefs and a, you know his perceptions of what's going on and I don't think I've noticed any evolutions of his editorial positions.

Geri: Do you do any outreach outside the editorial page to educate...

(21:25:29) Well I speak to any group that asks me to speak. Um, I don't recall being asked very often to speak to Arab groups, I'm certainly willing to. Um, I mean we do our work in the newspaper. I don't know that it's ... I don't see that it the point of going out into the community and repeating what we say here, I mean it's not our job to, to, uh, go out and further explain to try to convince people who, you know, we recognize people have a different opinion than we do. That's OK. We're not, we're trying to express our opinion. We're not necessarily trying to hold somebody down and say "You have to agree with us." You know, we recognize there's validity in their positions and they probably come to their positions the same way we come to ours, through very careful research, and um a discussion of the issue.

(22:25:21) Geri: Now does your editorial on a Sunday newspaper, does that go through an editorial process.

(22:34:20) Finley: Well no, it goes through an editing process, but like everything else. But the opinions in the column are my opinions that are not the newspaper's opinions. They may, they may correspond and I wouldn't get oh, uh, too far away from the opinions, you know, from the traditional opinions of the newspaper but that, I'm speaking for myself. Anytime that my, my column say is on an article, I'm speaking for myself. Any time my name is on an article, I'm speaking for myself.

Geri: "Lust for Jewish blood" ... You know, maybe I could've said it a different way...

(23:31:00) Well you know, you always think. I'm not sure I wouldn't imply that I've done so in this case. I think that there is a commitment to violence that has to be dealt with and I think part of the problem in the Middle East is that the Palestinians have been rewarded for supporting violence rather than made to pay the consequences for it. I think that people who employ terrorism, people who support terrorism, people who advocate violence and support violence ought not be given a seat at the negotiating table because of that violence. I think first you pay the consequences to that violence and commit to peace and then, and then you get a seat at the

table and I think there's been an opposite approach to the Palestinians and it has prolonged their suffering and prolonged the bloodshed in the Middle East.

Geri: So where does your opinion come from... Was it nurtured

(24:36:20) Finley: Well, I don't know that it, it, it reaches into my childhood – laughs – You know I think to me, it's a matter of right and wrong. Terrorism is wrong. Terrorism is wrong whether it occurs in Ireland, or in the Middle East or in the United States. Whether it's carried out by, you know, by the Palestinians or the IRA or the Schnians or whomever, terrorism is wrong and I think the political causes to me doesn't matter because every terrorist believe their cause is just. Nobody would go out here and strap a bomb to themselves and blow up innocent people if they weren't convinced in their mind that their cause was just. The cause doesn't matter, it's the, it's the action, and the absolute reprehensible nature of terrorism that matters, that matters to be and, and, you know, when somebody tells me, oh yes we have suicide bombers and we've had this, all this, this shooting last week in the seminary, but you have to look at how the Palestinians have suffered and I say no, I look at the terrorism and nothing, nothing justifies that.

Bob: Some people who say that the incursing by the Israelis into the West Bank... is terrorism.

(26:22:00) Finley: Some people do say that, I don't. I'm sorry. Some people would say that, I'm not among them. I've heard that argument many times and I'm not oblivious to that argument but you have a chicken and egg situation here, what, what, you know, what causes what and I believe the terrorism provokes the incursions and the other response. I believe if the Palestinians had divorced themselves from terror, from the violence a decade ago they would have a state now, they would be a prosperous, peaceful people. I think that they have that capacity, I think that it's, they're very intelligent, educated populace and I think that they could do wonderful things with their own state. I don't believe they'll get a state as long, as long as they engage in terror. You know, you see, what people talk about when they compare the incursions to terror, I think about, OK, both London and Dresden were bombed during World War II. I consider the bombing of London by the Germans an act of aggression. I consider the bombing of Dresden by the Allies an act of defense and I guess I would look at the same way, as the, at the sort of cycle in the in Israel.

Bob: Could you see the Palestinians ... a Palestinian family who lost a child

(28:09:02) Certainly, I can see how they can look at it that way. I don't look at it that way. Um, and I think it's a very self-destructive process that is going on there um, I don't think there is anything more detestable than um watching a young person and putting a suicide belt on a going and blowing up other young people. I think that's a despicable practice and I think the people who engage in that practice ought to be condemned and not celebrated.

Pat: Can I ask, what kind of response outside of Siblani and Sherri Muhzer responses, the "lust for Jewish blood." What kind of responses did that get?

(28:52:00) Well I think they're fairly typical of the responses we've seen here. I mean, that's not atypical, but if you look at the, if you look at what's going on in terms of the, I call it brainwashing of Palestinian children, the message they're getting in their schools, the message they're getting through their children programming on Palestinian television, I would ask you to look at describe it as anything other than teaching blood lust.

---Siblani response #3 --- (29:54:24) – (30:33:50)

(30:34:10) Finley: (laughs) That's almost too absurd to address, but um I'm anxious to respond to this. He's correct, I don't make any bones to where I stand, um, I am pro-Israel. I'm anti-terrorist, not anti-Arab and it's, you notice the disingenuous there, of how he tried to take my position on the Middle East and tried to extract that and try apply it to the Arab-American community here, which is total nonsense and it requires me to question what his real motives are here. Because if you look at the positions The Detroit News has taken under my direction on issues of importance to the American, or the Arab-American community ... we've been almost 100% with them in terms of opposing, we're one of the few conservative newspapers in the county that have opposed broad, broad, pieces of the Patriot Act, broad portions of the Patriot Act, stood up against illegal searches, uh, round-ups of immigrants. We've come out against racial profiling and the profiling of Arab-Americans. We have been 100% with the Arab community on Arab-American issues. What Mr. Siblani can't seem to do is separate Arab-Americans from the Arabs in the Middle East and the Arabs in the Palestinian territories. I do, and I think you have to wonder what is his real agenda here. Is he advocating for Arab-Americans or is he trying to use this, this, is he trying to make some sort of connection if you don't support Arabs in the Middle East, you're racist towards Arabs in America. Which I find totally offensive and a bit sinister, a bit disingenuous, he's trying to, to leverage sympathy for Arab-Americans in this country and they deserve some. They've been badly treated as a means of influencing policy in the Middle East.

(32:44:28) Geri: Calls you a racist, how do you respond to him?

(32:50:21) Finley: Sure, mmmm, I mean, you can't, if you can't take a bit a name calling you've got no business in this job. That's not the worst I've been called and he's not the, he's certainly not the only name caller, but I enjoy my conversations with, uh, Emad. I think he uh, he offers a very intelligent and a very lively, lively argument and we're always cordial and I always enjoy seeing him.

(33:15:00) Geri: What else have you been called?

(33:15:25) Finley: Well we don't have to get into all of that.

---watching Ray??? --- (33:37:04) – (34:06:20)

(34:06:20) Finley: I think, Ish made a key point and I think, I appreciate the point. We are friends and we disagree passionately and I think that's the way the discourse ought to be. We ought not personalize our opinions. People who disagree ought to be able to get a long on a personal basis and that's too rare in America. I respect the fact that he disagrees with my, my editorials. That's

the nature of opinions. There's always a point and a counter point. There are always a number of people on this hand who agree one way and a number of people who agree another and there's no reason we have to hate each other. I mean that's, we've managed to have a two-party system in this country for 200 years without coming to a bloody battle over it which is uncommon in the world. We have to maintain a civil discourse and Ish and I have a civil discourse. He's wrong on the other area, that there's no counter point. We go out of our way to present, uh, the other side of argument and to allow access to Arab writers to our, our pages. We do run a regular column from an Arab-American as I mentioned **Iman ...??? Who?** And that's caused me a lot of grief, you know. I had the Christian Broadcasting Network in here a um, uh, a year a two ago, 'why do you run this, this, this column? He's provocative, he's anti-Israel. Why do you run that?' And we run it because it's a viewpoint people in this community have and it ought to have an opportunity to be expressed just like my opinion has an opportunity to be expressed. This insane woman from the Jewish community Debbie Shelztel (spelling?) followed me around for a while to public speaking engagements and heckled me as, as being sort of anti-Semite or terrorist support because we publish, you know Imam's column, which I find highly amusing. I was, but you know, people today tend not to want to see the other person's opinion in the paper and we make a very conservative effort to make sure folks see a broad range of viewpoints.

Geri: And Imam's been a regular contributor since when?

(36:38:08) Finley: Oh gosh, two years now. Since, well, maybe longer. He's one of our faith and policy contributors and it's a once a month schedule, it might be once every six weeks you know, we get a number of clergy from different faiths in this community to uh, to write and he generally offers a very provocative column. Uh, we run it, I don't think we ever not run his column because disagree with what he says. We put it in there and let people decide for themselves.

---watching Siblani #4 --- (37:28:27) – (39:31:17)

(39:31:18) Finley: Well, I'm not going to deal with um, address Mr. Siblani's paranoia. Um, I don't recall the photograph he speaks of. I don't believe it ran on my pages. It would be very unusual for us to run a three-column photograph of anyone on our pages. If you have a copy of it, I'll take a look at it, um. That's um, yah, well, OK, so it's a two-column um photograph that ran with an op-ed on our op-ed page and it appears to be an accurate cut line and an accurate depiction of uh, of uh what's going on there. I don't know what his object would be. If he didn't want his picture made, he probably shouldn't have got up in a public rally and spoke. I mean he had to know there were photographers there um I'm trying to recall what else he um rambled on about um.

Geri: response

(40:40:22) Finley: We have, and I don't recall his response whether we've run it or not. I know we've run a number of, of letters from him. We've run pieces from his wife. We've not been shy about running the harshest criticism or response to our opinion. In fact, I generally insist that we publish the harshest criticism of my work because I think that's fair. So, I don't know what he's

talking about. He's had access to our pages and his wife's had access to our pages and other people in the community have had access to our pages so, you know, that's what we can do.

Geri: responses, pro-Israel, pro-Hezbollah, or I'm sorry, pro-Palestine.

(41:40:12) Finley: Well some pro-Hezbollah. I mean as I said at the beginning they're very passionate and I mean, they often are very personal.

Geri: Would you say they're 50-50?

(41:52:23) Finley: No, no, uh, no, they're far less than 50-50. I would say they're more like 70-30. Pro-Israel, yeah. I mean, they, it would be probably what you would expect from a conservative newspaper. I mean, you know, it's not just Jews and Arabs responding, it's uh, you know, others as well. And I would say our readers tend to be far more supportive of Israel than they are of the Palestinians in this conflict.

Geri: That's interesting, a pro and con kind of thing, but there seems to be a kind of balance.

(42:34:00) We try to balance it, we try to balance it, um, we think we're very sensitive to the reality that people are counting and we try to balance it uh, but, we get a far bigger pro-Israel response than we do a pro-Palestinian response.

Geri:

(43:03:10) Finley: Well again I said it's not just Jews writing in support of Israel. Others are interested in this issue as well.

The connection that Mr. Siblani was trying to make. This picture was taken next to a column by ...

(43:46:14) Finley: Well, there..., yeah, well if you went to the rally and I did go to some of the rallies and um, there was some pretty frightening stuff on signs down there. If you choose to speak at a rally where that sort of attitude is being displayed, you can't, you can't then say, well then my picture shouldn't be associated with it. I mean there were some very hateful anti-Semitic, anti-Jewish things being said and being displayed at that rally and, I mean, I think that if you're going to associate yourself with an event of that nature you have to take the consequences, you have to be accountable.

Bob: Is there something that the media could do better to ease tension between the two communities?

(44:45:17) Finley: The media's job is to present, is to tell the story, to present the facts. Uh, to provide a diversity of opinion. The communities can take that and do with it what they, what they will. I think our job is to present as much information as we can in hopes that people will be

better informed, more knowledgeable um, approach this from an intellectual rather than an emotional standpoint. Uh, we're not going to mediate between the two communities. Our job is to provide communication and we try to do that as best we can.