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# UNIVERSITY Alter: Weird news a bad fad

By Lori Bettineski  
Oregon Daily Emerald

If anyone can relate to media figures, it's Oregonians. With Senator Bob Packwood and Tonya Harding making headlines almost daily, the topic of this year's annual Ruhl Lecture Wednesday afternoon hit rather close to home.

Sponsored by the School of Journalism, the lecture drew one of its largest crowds in eighteen years when *Newsweek's* senior editor and news media critic Jonathon Alter spoke on "The Geraldoization of News."

Known for his critical look at the media's role in American society, Alter began his speech by thanking the large crowd for coming at a time when Geraldo, Sally Jesse Raphael and Phil Donahue were competing against him for attention.



Jonathan Alter

"I'm lucky you showed up today," Alter said. "The rest of America has appointments with people who are so familiar to everyone that we don't even need last names. If Tonya or Michael or Lorena or Joey and Amy were on today, I might as well pack it in right now."

Familiarity by the public with well-known tabloid celebrities was one of the key themes Alter focused on during his 45-minute speech.

Citing supermarket tabloids and syndicated television shows as a major source of "Geraldoization," Alter said he believes the 1990s are becoming too wrapped up in "weird-news tabloid reporting."

"Right now we're stuck with freak-of-the-week coverage," Alter said. "The entire media establishment are finding themselves obsessing over John Bobbitt's penis or Lyle Menendez' toupe or Michael Fay's buttocks in Singapore."

Alter emphasized that journalists working in the media today need to focus more attention on what is really important, not what sells on the newsstands. After working in the field for almost 20 years, Alter said he felt sensationalism in the media today is what alarms him the most.

"Many viewers confuse what they see on Geraldo or Donahue or Hard Copy with news," Alter said. "The result of all this is that people see and hear more news than ever before, but believe less of it."

"And when they believe less of it, they grow more cynical and detached from the very questions of public importance that the news is supposed to engage them in," he said.

As unpopular or unappealing as the truth may

**The truth may be that the maid doesn't have the foggiest idea what Michael Jackson does with children, but if you put her on saying that, everyone will change the channel.**

—Jonathan Alter,  
*Newsweek's senior editor and media critic*

be, Alter reminded the media and journalism students in the crowd that truth is still the highest value of journalism.

In emphasizing the value of truth, he also emphasized that "untabloidish," unpopular news is often the type of important news that people need to make informed decisions on as responsible citizens.

"The truth is not always what the public really wants, it's claim notwithstanding," Alter said. "The truth may be that the maid doesn't have the foggiest idea what Michael Jackson does with children, but if you put her on saying that, everyone will change the channel."

Alter concluded his speech by emphasizing that this type of responsiveness can be a sellout and that the highest form of media responsibility is to avoid responding to the desires of the audience, citing Connie Chung as an example.

"Tonya Harding has a place on the evening news, but it's not Connie Chung's place to come to Portland to anchor the CBS Evening News from Harding's rink," Alter said.

"Along the same lines, serial killers have a place on television news, but something's wrong when the coverage is so extensive and exploitive that we begin to believe Americans are actually at risk of being murdered by serial killers... though no show would risk pointing that out."

Alter's speech was part of the Ruhl Symposium on Ethics in Journalism that brings prominent professionals and media scholars to the University to discuss responsibility in journalism and the boundaries of ethics in news.

The annual lecture was established through a gift from the late Mabel Ruhl of Medford in memory of her husband, Robert W. Ruhl, who died in 1967. He was the Pulitzer Prize-winning editor and publisher of the *Medford Mail Tribune*.

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### LECTURES

19 April 3:00 p.m. 115 Laurence, 1190 Franklin Blvd.

**Christian Creativity in Eastern Orthodox Icons** (illustrated lecture)

A. Dean McKenzie, Professor Emeritus of Art History, UO

19 April 4:00 p.m. Warner Gallery, Museum of Art, 1430 Johnson Ln.

**Tour of the UO Icon collection**, Professor McKenzie

19 April 7:30 p.m. 115 Laurence, 1190 Franklin Blvd.

**Aithos, the Holy Mountain** (illustrated lecture)

Frank R. Horbeck, Professor of Art History, University of Wisconsin, Madison

20 April 4:00 p.m. 100 Willamette, 1371 E. 13th Ave.

**Christianity and the Arts**

Doug Adams, Professor of Religion and the Arts, Pacific School of Religion

20 April 7:30 p.m. 238 Gilbert, 955 E. 13th Ave.

**Christianity and Architecture**

Thomas Gordon Smith, Chairman and Professor, School of Architecture, University of Notre Dame

21 April 4:00 p.m. 231 Gilbert, 955 E. 13th Ave.

**Christianity and Literary Artistry: William Kennedy's**

**Purgatorial Vision**, Ted L. Estess, Associate Professor of English and Dean of the Honors College, University of Houston

21 April 7:00 p.m. 110 Willamette, 1371 E. 13th Ave.

**Panel Discussion** Professors Adams, Estess, and Smith

\*Requests for accommodations related to disability should be made to Professor J. T. Sanders @ 346-4997 by 8 April.

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