



NICOLE BARKER | PHOTOGRAPHER

Jay Harris speaks about "Ethical Stewardship in the News" at the 2005 Ruhl Lecture on Thursday afternoon in the EMU Ballroom. The lecture caps off a week of events sponsored by the School of Journalism and Communication.

## Public must demand media accountability, speaker says

Jay Harris spoke at the 29th-annual Ruhl Lecture, hosted by the School of Journalism and Communication

BY AYISHA YAHYA  
NEWS EDITOR

The public has a responsibility to demand accountable media that serve the citizenry's interests, a media scholar Jay Harris said Thursday. Harris, director of The Center for the Study of Journalism and Democracy at University of Southern California and former publisher of the San Jose Mercury News, delivered the 29th-annual Ruhl Lecture hosted by the School of Journalism and Communication.

"Who better to judge the performance of the institution of democracy than the audience citizens," Harris said during his lecture, titled "Ethical Stewardship in Media."

Journalists must realize their role as stewards of an institution created for the public good, he said.

"The press at its best, a press committed to public interest, ... is an institution of democracy, and it is in fact our democracy," he said. "We in some way share responsibility of what is happening in the press."

Harris said the nation's founding fathers had recognized freedom of speech as vital to the democratic republic and viewed free press as the

"bulwark of liberty."

But in contemporary times, government leaders, corporate imperatives and skilled propagandists with various interests undermined the media, he said.

Journalists also despair about the increasing challenges newspapers face from corporatization to declining readership and Internet competition, he added.

"I worry most about the growing despair among journalists, because if journalists cease to believe the higher purposes of journalism, the central role of journalism in our democracy, then the noble flame at the heart of the journalistic enterprise just might go out," he said.

Those in the media must not lose faith in journalism, Harris said.

"Journalism still makes a difference," he said. "It makes differences large and small, in ways seen and unseen, in the lives of millions."

Harris said he still believes there is a future for what he called the "journalism of consequence" but said journalism for public interest will not survive if important ethical decisions are discussed only within a corporate

agenda. Instead, to be ethical stewards of the institution of journalism, journalists have to defend and raise the standards of excellence in their field.

The public must take an active stance in holding the media accountable, because citizens must be capable of judging those who are stewards of the public trust, he said.

"If a community can benefit from local good-government and community watchdog groups, certainly a community could benefit from local good-journalism groups," Harris said.

Senior Hillary Manton said she appreciated Harris' insight on the need for community involvement in addressing media problems.

"If you don't have the interest, you need to create the interest," she said.

Journalism Professor Tom Bivins also agreed with Harris' charge to the public to help change journalism.

"It's up to us," Bivins said. "If we want change, we have to make it."

Tim Gleason, the dean of the School of Journalism and Communication, said the focus to make changes often falls on the journalists themselves but that Harris is extending that responsibility to the public.

"This is a shared responsibility, and we have an obligation to demand good journalism," Gleason said.

ayishayahya@dailyemerald.com

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