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Careers in First Amendment and Media Law

Whitney Meers

Whether defending against libel charges, protecting anonymous sources or dealing with programming contracts, media lawyers' work affects individuals, communities and even the federal government. Attorneys brave enough to endure the constantly-evolving media landscape may not reap huge financial rewards, but their hard work impacts nearly every aspect of our lives.

On February 20, 2007, the lawyers behind some of New York's largest media groups shared their experiences at the "Careers in First Amendment and Media Law" panel, hosted by the Committee on Law Student Perspectives of the New York City Bar Association. The moderator was David McCraw, Vice President and Assistant General Counsel of The New York Times Company and Chair of the Association's Communications and Media Law Committee. The panel included: Stephanie S. Abrutyn, Senior Counsel in the Litigation Department of Home Box Office (HBO); Jonathan Donnellan, a Senior Counsel at Hearst Corporation; Lynn Oberlander, General Counsel of *The New Yorker*; and Lawrence Savell, of Chadbourne & Parke LLP. . The panelists discussed a range of topics, including the beginnings of their careers in media law, their most rewarding experiences, and the most challenging and outrageous aspects of their jobs.

Mr. McGraw began the panel by relaying an anecdote about an anti-Semitic man who still lives at home with his mother. After Mr. McGraw explained that his job required him to field constant phone calls from such a man, he began the discussion by asking the panelists, "What do *you* do all day?"

Ms. Abrutyn said she dealt with many areas of law, which sometimes included issues that are not directly related to media, such as easements and property. Some media-specific areas include trademark infringement and reviewing editorial content. "My job is different every day," Ms. Abrutyn said.

Ms. Abrutyn said that she started her Media Law career after working in a law firm. As she began to question where she wanted her career to take her, a former classmate told her about a job opening at ABC News. She interviewed for the position, and six weeks later she was an in-house litigator for the company. But, she found the daily news cycle "very demanding," and this eventually led her to pursue her position at HBO.

Part of Ms. Abrutyn's job involves reviewing scripts for HBO's programs. Regarding *Real Time with Bill Maher*, she said, "I get a packet a couple of inches thick; and only one of every ten jokes will end up on the show."

Mr. Savell was the only panelist who did not work as in-house counsel. Although he is at a law firm, he has developed a specialized interest in media law and made it a part of his legal practice.

Mr. Savell said he maintains his interest in Media Law by creating opportunities for himself. He said one of the most rewarding media cases he worked on involved assisting reporters at a publication that printed stories about the metal industry. The reporters had uncovered a huge fraud scheme, and needed help tackling the legal issues relating to the exposé. With his help, the reporters were so successful in their investigations that they were awarded the Jesse H. Neal National Business Journalism Award for Excellence in News Coverage. Mr. Savell said it's the "business equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize."

"The reason I'm here is to tell you it's not an all or none thing," according to Mr. Savell. He advised the program's attendees "if you wind-up at a law firm and you have an outside interest in Media Law, learn more about Media Law so you will be able to work on Media Law cases within your firm.

Mr. Donnellan, Senior Counsel for Hearst Corporation, said, as a lawyer, working with editors can be challenging. "You can't teach them everything," he said. "So, you teach them to be good issue spotters."

He said typical issues in his legal practice might include access matters, subpoenas, and litigation.

One of the perks that Ms. Oberlander appreciates is that her job at *The New Yorker* requires her to read each issue of the magazine completely through. She said, "I've never been able to read the magazine cover-to-cover, and now I get paid to do it."

Ultimately, all of the panelists agreed on one thing; that this is a great area of law, and those who do it really love it.

Whitney Meers is a student of Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, 2009. She is a student member of the New York City Bar Association's Committee on Law Student Perspectives.

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