



Learning ethics as a second language

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So many calls to the SPJ Ethics Hotline are questions on deadline, and we're always happy to help.

Then came a request from Ohio, where Stephanie Calondis Geiger of the Columbus Council on World Affairs was teaching journalism to 60 teenagers. All but two were Somali.

Could we talk to them about ethics as if they were calling the hotline for advice?

Yes. And we did.

As her students learned photography, one piece of journalism immersion, Calondis Geiger contacted the hotline to asking about case studies.

She chose good ones. One was an elected official giving the middle finger at a public political event. Another was a Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of a mother and child falling when a fire escape collapsed during an attempt to rescue them.

In one day, three ethics committee members from Maryland, Minnesota and Washington state held separate sessions with the students by phone.

During my session about the politician's crude gesture, the discussion was lively. Maybe the offending finger could be pixilated in print, but unvarnished on the Internet, one student suggested.

I told them about a famous photo of a convicted child killer extending both of his middle fingers in a California courtroom after he was convicted and how newspapers made different decisions about printing it.

Later, ethics committee member Jane Kirtley led the group in an analysis of the news value and public interest of the fire escape photo and what the photographer's role should be. In an e-mail summary afterward, Kirtley wrote about telling them that "Seek Truth and Report It" and "Minimize Harm" weren't the only relevant sections of the SPJ Code of Ethics in this case.

"I pointed out that 'Be Accountable' was important, too — the idea that a news organization would share its analysis and decision-making process with readers/viewers, who might not agree but would at least understand why the photo would run."

The San Jose Mercury News did just that on the front page under the photo of the defiant child killer. Hundreds of readers wrote and called the paper, many with positive reactions.

“It sounded like a very interesting class to teach,” wrote ethics committee vice chairman Fred Brown, who handled the third session, on taking pictures of accident victims and dead bodies.

Calondis Geiger told me about one journalistic dilemma her students were trying to work through: documenting their own culture in Columbus, which has the country’s second largest Somali population behind Minneapolis.

She had them do a photography scavenger hunt, finding images of Somali families doing everyday things. They were met with resistance from people who didn’t want to be photographed, possibly for societal or religious reasons.

Often students were loyal to their journalistic pursuit and looked for ways to carry out their assignment instead of shying away.

The students earned \$7 an hour to be journalists, Calondis Geiger said, thanks to a grant secured by another nonprofit group. She hoped that a stimulating curriculum might motivate them beyond the money.

Calondis Geiger — who was an education reporter at a daily newspaper for several months — said she took a different approach with her students, some of whom are just learning English and relatively new to America.

She and co-instructor Mike Lorz, the 2007-08 president of SPJ’s Central Ohio Pro chapter, aimed for grand principles, namely “the role of a free press in a democracy.”

They went over the Fourth Estate and the First Amendment.

“Some think of it as high level, too advanced for teenagers,” Calondis Geiger said, “but I thought it was important.”

She said she tied in global press freedom since almost all of her students come from a country where journalists are killed.

Reporters Without Borders’ Worldwide Press Freedom Index for 2007 ranked Somalia 159 out of 169 countries, two spots below Iraq. (The United States is 48 — behind Nicaragua, ahead of Togo.)

As reporters, her students had to break from their shells, gather information and hear other viewpoints.

“Journalism gives you a reason to talk to people,” she said.

I found inspiration from this program in which cultures and young minds are developing through a journalistic prism, and ethical thinking is at the heart of it all.

Calondis Geiger told me there was no doubt that ethics as a process needed to be a foundation.

She said her students had learned ethics through the Quran, “but the idea of journalism as a deliberate and well-thought-out craft was news to them.”