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From The Morning Call

U.S. should help China to learn freedom of the press

I recently gave a three-hour talk to state and local information officers, stressing to them that when dealing with the news media, "no comment" was not an option, that they needed to be forthcoming and proactive with the press.

At lunch after my talk, the workshop organizers chatted energetically and at one point my interpreter leaned over to me and said, quite pleased, "They are pleased with your advice about 'no comment' and think it is a good idea to be forthcoming."

Why did I need an interpreter?

Because I was in Xian, Shaanxi Province, People's Republic of China, not the United States, and I was speaking to people who served as information officers for a variety of offices at the state and city level. Every department, I was told, has an information officer, and while I'm no good at crowd estimates, the large room in which I made my oral and PowerPoint presentation was full and only one or two people dozed as I talked, about par for any lecture I've given in my 30-year career as a college professor.

When my department head at Tsinghua University asked me to give this talk, he did not say "pull your punches" or "don't offend anyone." Instead, he advised me to speak honestly and to give the audience good advice based on my perspective. He said the local officials needed to hear what a westerner thought.

And so, I led off by reading part of a New York Times story about a railroad to Tibet in which the reporter reveals that the Railway Ministry, which he says he has contacted several times over a year, kept saying "no comment." Granted, my audience wasn't dealing with anything as sensitive as Tibet and I acknowledged that, saying that I was reading the story to make the point that "no comment" was the wrong response.

I shared several other stories I had downloaded from a newspaper database to demonstrate that coverage of China in western newspapers (not just the United States) was demonstrably positive and that was a result of the new openness in China, something I had been watching from afar since my first Fulbright lectureship in China in 1994. I also answered questions for nearly an hour out of the three, including one about what laws the Chinese government might enact to control the press.

I said the Chinese government doesn't need any laws. It just locks up journalists who are a problem. They don't get legal representation, they don't get a trial. They just disappear in the prison gulag. I cited as my example a Chinese staff member of The New York Times, Zhao Yan, who was accused of revealing state secrets when the Times reported that Jiang Zemin would retire from his last government post, thereby totally relinquishing power. Zhao has been in prison for more than a year and held incommunicado.

On my return from Xian, I reflected on a situation that had occurred in May when the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard had announced it was going to work with the Beijing Olympics Committee spokespersons to help them work with the press. The negative response from Nieman alumni was fast and furious (and, I thought, a bit sanctimonious and self-righteous). You would have thought that the Nieman staff was proposing to traffic in state secrets with North Korea. And so Nieman backed off and the training program moved elsewhere in the United States.

What a missed opportunity! I don't suggest for one minute that China is the perfect country when it comes to issues such as, among others, press freedom, but I also note that the United States locks up reporters too. Ask Judith Miller.

Nevertheless, if we expect China to change, we will not do it by not engaging them in conversations below the diplomatic level. I can imagine what a great experience it would have been for the Chinese Olympics spokespersons to be in Cambridge to see democracy in action. Who knows how they would have changed their approach to dealing with the news media in 2008. Let's face it: The western news media will hardly be a docile bunch, and instead of responding 'no comment' to every tough question, the Chinese spokespersons need to learn to answer questions forthrightly. But they won't if we don't engage them in that conversation.

That's what I learned in Xian. That's the opportunity Nieman threw away. And I have at least two more province-level workshops to go to discuss press freedom. Somebody gets it, and I think they are Chinese, not American.

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