

Harmony v. Freedom

I've either taught journalism or been a journalist for most of the past 40 years. Thus, on hundreds – perhaps thousands – of occasions I've chatted with and addressed individuals and groups of students, educators and journalists on how different news organizations, journalists and nations cover stories. Never before now, though, had I stood before a group of journalism reporting students to discuss the media's coverage of a story about which no one was remotely familiar.

The story in question was that of the Georgetown University's men's basketball team which played the Chinese People's Liberation Arm Team Aug. 18, when U.S. Vice President Joe Biden was in Beijing. During the game, a fight broke out and fists, chairs and water bottles were thrown, and Chinese audience members came on the floor and attacked and stomped Georgetown student athletes. Referees apparently did nothing to stop the brawl and the Hoya team walked off the court with the score tied 64-64.

Cell phone videos of the brawl were posted on the Internet and the Washington Post and Los Angeles Times covered the melee extensively. Clips of the event were shown on ESPN's SportsCenter. China's Xinhua news agency carried a four-paragraph item the following day saying "a brawl erupted ... in a friendly basketball game," and provided no specifics.

After showing my reporting class (all of whom were English-speaking Chinese university students) the video and stories from Xinhua, the L.A. Times and the Post, I asked them which key facts they would include were they writing about this game. The "to cover" list the students came up with included the brawl, the student/professional teams competing, that Biden was in China at the time, how the fight started, how the fans reacted, the referees' inaction, what injuries players sustained, the "final" score of the game and reactions of

members and coaches of both teams.

Then, I asked students to write the first few paragraphs for three different stories: one for an American audience, one for a Chinese audience and one for a worldwide audience. When students shared their stories, only a couple of students had even mentioned – just in passing – there had been a fight, and no one included any of the other items they had listed as being “key facts” to the story.

These students all have good English-language skills and had taken a course in newswriting. But each of them had severely self-censored him/her self when it came to reporting news that was unflattering about China. If bright, budding future journalists can find it so easy to self-regulate, I can only imagine what China Daily will be like when this English-language newspaper launches a 24-page, full-color weekly tabloid to be printed in New York, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Los Angeles, Houston, Seattle and Atlanta.

The weekly will also have a website and mobile applications. According to China Daily’s editor in chief, Zhu Ling, “In our process of globalization, China Daily is dedicated to ‘Connecting China, Connecting the World’ and committed to promoting communication across cultures and geographies for a harmonious world.”

China’s focus on “harmony” dates at least to the time of Confucius, and is indeed a wonderful goal for the media of a nation. But carried to excess, a harmonious media can be a severely censored media in the same way that America’s focus on “freedom,” while a worthy goal, can result in journalism that is politically partisan and destructive to democracy.

And so I ask myself, what will it take for China’s media to fairly and accurately report on issues concerning both our nations? Chinese journalism students clearly know what should be reported, but they are reluctant to engage in such

reporting. Can we expect China's professional journalists – especially those working in the United States – to be any different from my UIBE students? And to what extent might we be successful in having journalism about America and China that is both constructive and open?

In this time of global fiscal and political uncertainty, these are mass media ethics questions worth pursuing.

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